After Action Review of INASP's communication capacity building initiative for seven ACACIA partners

January 2012

Enrique Mendizabal (enrique@mendizabal.co.uk)
&
Martine Zeuthen (mz@integrityresearch.co.uk)

Table of Content

1. Summary

The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) was approached by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in December 2010 to provide research communication support to seven of the IDRC ACACIA programme's research partners (PANAF, UHIN, GRACE, RIA, PICTURE, OASIS and eARN).

This review aims to assess to what extent the activities INASP planned and implemented have contributed to building the communication capacity of the partners. We assess INASP's approach by reviewing how the project was designed and implemented and identify a number of lessons that could be been learned from the process. Finally we make recommendations for future initiatives on capacity building for better communication.

In short, we consider that the initiative has contributed to increasing the awareness of the importance of communications, as well as a strategic understanding by the partners of how to inform policy through the communication of research. INASP's approach has also provided the partners with some practical tools to improve their communication (such as press releases, communication strategy etc.). However, the level of interest from the partners and the unique challenge of how to build the capacity of networks were not sufficiently well understood and as a consequence not all of the partners engaged with the process to get the most out of the project. In this document we analyse the different phases of the project, what challenges were met and why, and suggest how a deeper learning and more transformative effects could have been achieved.

Planning: Identifying the partners and assessing how to design the approach was a key component of the planning phase. IDRC supported INASP in the initial stages but did not sufficiently explain how the networks worked in order for INASP to incorporate this information in its project's design. The project was well managed and structured in an organised manner that was easy for the partners to engage with.

Implemented activities: The key phases in the project were 1) a *needs assessment* to identify the needs and areas within communication in each organisation that required strengthening. 2) A *workshop*, where a combined Training of Trainers and Development of a Communication strategy programme was delivered. 3) A *mentoring* phase, that was aimed to follow-up on the self-identified needs and interests the partners had expressed.

Implications: The large up-front event that followed a large needs assessment gave the project an air of seriousness and importance that helped to develop interest and attention from those who participated. It was professionally developed and implemented. The main challenges for the project were timing and the specific nature of the organisations benefiting from the support. As research network organisations that work in collaboration with wider networks, they have very diverse experiences and communication needs. The communication support

initiative was not built into their work plans and was not a key priority. However, among the organisations that were better established such as UHIN, communication is an integral part of their work and so it was easier for them to manage and allocate time for the project. The better-established organisations were also the most sophisticated communicators who had very specific technical needs, which this project did not address in all cases. The lack of clarity regarding a follow up budget and not providing the partners a sense of what mentoring needs INASP could and could not support had a significant impact on the project's outcome.

Recommendations: Our main recommendation for future communication support initiatives is that starting with a thorough needs assessment and a face-to-face event has a positive impact on the rest of the project. In terms of recommendations for better capacity building, we recommend a more individualised approach where an investigation and attempt to understand how to address capacity building in each particular type of organisation is taken; such as networks in this case. We also recommend that expectations and objectives be clearly explained from the outset with the prospective beneficiaries; even before a proposal to the funder is submitted and a contract with it is signed. Conversations with the beneficiaries, the partners in this case, should include details such as the possibility of accessing additional funds to implement the new strategies and the effort that their participation will entail.

2. Approach of the review

This After Action Review provides an overview of the activities carried out by INASP and an assessment of the extent to which the project has achieved its intended objectives.

The approach includes a review of all available documents, including IDRC's concept note and INASP's original and reviewed proposals as well as documents such as the needs assessments, write-ups of communications with partners and donors, the mentoring proposals, and the internal evaluations of the mentoring provided so far. Key staff in INASP and people in the partner organisations, and the two IDRC managers involved were also interviewed for this review. The interviews and the document review provided the basis for our assessment and description of the challenges and achievements of the initiative.

This review has also been informed by lessons learned from ODI's support of the IDRC Globalisation, Governance and Poverty project as well as a simultaneous review of ODI's capacity building support for three other ACACIA partners.

Overall, our assessment is that INASP's intervention was successful to the extent that all partners expressed that they learned something from the workshop and understood how to better address their own communication

needs. However, partners also expressed confusion as to why they were engaged, some had very specific technical needs that they did not find to be sufficiently addressed, and finally some organisations were disappointed with the lack of support for their mentoring proposals.

The report is divided into five sections: An initial brief narrative of the overall implementation of the project, including the needs assessment, workshop and mentoring phases. This is followed by a description of the background and identification of partners, providing more detail on each partner and the support they have received. Then the lessons learned and finally recommendations for future interventions are outlined in the final two sections.

3. The project
IDRC approached INASP to provide communication capacity building to its partners alongside the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

During a visit to the UK, the IDRC manager outlined the focus and aim of the initiative: to improve communication skills amongst researchers in ACACIA. INASP expressed interested in the work as it considered it a good match with its previous experience, mainly on the demand for evidence from policymakers. This was an opportunity to engage on the supply side of evidence informed policymaking and develop a new line of work. The project also allowed INASP to engage a new member of staff who is hoped will develop this line of work further.

INASP's approach consisted of three phases: a needs assessment, a workshop, and mentoring on selected areas. The objective of the approach was to enhance communication capacity of the partner organisations, to help them develop communication strategies and in particular develop their capacity to interact with policy makers in a broad sense. A secondary objective, to encourage the partner organisations to build the capacity of others, was incorporated into the workshop by means of a "training of trainers" component.

3.1 Background
IDRC was aware that ACACIA was coming to an end and so decided, in 2010, to continue to support some of its partners on research outreach and uptake in the process of winding up.

The idea of a communication initiative came as a result of an external evaluation of ACACIA, where it was noted that the programme was meeting its research objectives but not achieving its full potential in conveying the information outside the researchers engaged. Consequently it had limited reach and policy influence. It was recognised that researchers are not *per se* communicators and so it was suggested that with additional support, they could incorporate a communication element earlier in their programming.

During the ACACIA conference in Dakar in 2009, IDRC tested its partners' appetite for an increased communication element and, informed by the

previous work ODI had done with IDRCs GGP project, tried to develop a concept to come up with a training that could give skills to partners' to improve their communications.

3.2 Partner selection

The selection process started of by each programme officer in ACACIA (IDRC staff) volunteering relevant projects to be considered. For each project IDRC requested the partners to fill in a questionnaire and based upon those the partners to be supported were selected. The IDRC manager described some of the key criteria in our interview: needs, status, research status, relationship, and commitment. The questionnaires effectively became the expressions of interest from the ACACIA partners.

The selection process took place in the autumn of 2010 and the questionnaires were shared with INASP so that it could see how the partners had explained their interest in the project. The partners were intended to be networks but on some occasions they were sole organisations that did not operate as part of a network. Most of the partners that INASP worked with were coordinating bodies of wider networks of either individual organisations or individual researchers. When INASP took on the project it communicated with all the partners to ensure there was an adequate level of interest in the project from the network leaders.

INASP was initially asked to work with seven partners, but two did not engage and dropped off the project. IDRC was informed about this decision and tried to reach out to the partners via the ACACIA managers, but it became evident that the organisations were too busy to participate. Unfortunately, on some occasions, the partners' key personnel were too busy to engage with the communication initiative while other staff could have taken part.

INASP had been informed that all networks would have a communications officer by the time the programme began and INASP was looking to work with these individuals (or someone with that responsibility). However, in most cases they did not exist and there appeared to be little enthusiasm from the organisations' staff to either take on board those responsibilities or establish specific communication officer positions.

The staff that INASP engaged with were employed by members of the network and in general their jobs were to coordinate the ACACIA project across the network. Although the ACACIA networks were intended to continue after the end of ACACIA some networks did not have follow-up funding and hence phased out their activities. The coordinators hence had other concerns to deal with. In some cases, the communication initiative followed after the end of ACACIA and therefore some partners were hard to engage and showed little interest.

The three project phases are described below as well as a brief outline on planning.

3.3 Planning

INASP and IDRC had several discussions about the proposal that lead to adjustments to the approach and budget. As a result of the initial IDRC manager leaving the centre before the contract was finally agreed, the contracting phase took longer than initially anticipated and delayed the initiation of the implementation.

For INASP, an important objective was to learn from the experience and develop this line of their work. Meanwhile the overall objective of the project in itself according to INASP was to enhance the partners' communication capacity and support the development of their own communication strategies. That focus however changed in the process as the IDRC managers had revealed diverging views and concerns, and consequently developing actual strategies for each of the organisations became less of a priority.

3.4 Needs assessment

The needs assessment was the first phase of the project. It was intended to better understand the partners' interest for participating, as well as their specific needs to improve their communications capacity. It helped to update IDRC's own needs assessment and build a rapport between INASP and the partners.

The needs assessment showed that very different interests motivated participation. For example, according to INASP's project coordinator one organisation (UHIN) expressed that they were mainly interested in using the project as an opportunity to develop their capacity to do a better job. Others were less clear on their particular interest but engaged nonetheless, and someone participated out of personal interest.

In the process of producing the needs assessment, the INASP project manager talked to the network leaders and requested to be put in touch with senior researchers to interview. The first IDRC manager, Silvia Caicedo, was closely involved and so INASP and IDRC interviewed the researchers together. It proved rather difficult to get hold of all the network leaders and to engage the researchers in the assessment. IDRC did not have well established contact with the local networks and could therefore not facilitate their participation. Despite this, the partners did provide inputs into the needs assessment report and each network partner reviewed the document.

The needs assessment involved a review process in which an external panel of experts was involved. The partners sent examples of policy briefs and other communication tools in order for the panel to review and provide feedback. This was helpful to show the partners the potential benefit of engaging in the next steps of the project.

The assessment brought forth new ideas that helped to improve INASP's understanding of the partners' needs. It showed that internal communications within the networks were a key concern for most. Sharing learning from the workshop and making ongoing support available to the entire network could only work if the capacity to do so was developed, too. Therefore, a "training of

trainers" approach was included into the workshop agenda in order for the organisations to be able to cascade the content across the network. In our interview with INASP staff it was stressed that this approach is also in line with INASP's general approach to capacity development.

3.5 Workshop
The workshop presented an opportunity for all to meet, face to face, and early on in the project. It was originally planned as two events: One as a training of trainers on internal communication issues, and a second on how to develop a communication strategy. It was divided in this way because it was anticipated that two different sets of people would be interested in each. However, following the needs assessment and conversations with IDRC, INASP found that the same people were likely to participate in both and brought the two together in one workshop; unfortunately that made the workshop slightly disjointed.

In most cases it was not the leader of the network who participated but other representatives of the organisations. The objective for the workshop was to share the building blocks of a communication strategy so that the partners could develop one if desired.

The facilitators of the workshop were a combination of INASP staff and external trainers. Unfortunately, the two external trainers had not been fully briefed on the whole agenda and one had not worked with the tools that were presented. The facilitators, however, were research communication experts and had written communication strategies before, and so were able to provide good templates and examples.

In the interviews most partners expressed a high level of satisfaction with the workshop. The participants enjoyed learning about and discussing key questions such as 'what is policy', 'what is a policymaker', and 'how does policy happen'. They also recognised areas in which they already had some skills as well as areas they were not yet familiar with.

Networking was central to the workshop and the partners enjoyed working with each other. Many knew each other already from other ACACIA events but some partners from the same country were not familiar with each other and the event facilitated links between them. The training also provided a platform for peer support and review, which was highly valued. For example, within the training it worked well when partners shared a problem, so that all participants felt that they share common challenges with other organisations, and they all learned from each other's experiences and ways to overcome challenges in their daily work. Learning from each other also facilitated a better understanding of policy making and communications for influence in different environments.

3.6 Issue driven mentoring
The mentoring element of the project was organized according to issues and needs rather than INASP's expertise. The mentoring follow-up phase was presented during the final day of the workshop. INASP explained the mentoring they could offer in coordination with their external experts. The

partners were encouraged to write a proposal on what area they would like further mentoring on for up to four days worth of time. Unfortunately they had no sense of the budget that would be available and INASP and IDRC did not provide clear enough guidelines, according to the partners interviewed. Therefore some of the proposals that resulted were impossible to support within the financial parameters of the project. INASP received four proposals on time and one that came late and was not considered to be relevant to the project's objectives. The aim was to continue developing their communication skills but not to undertake actual communications activities, something that the partners did not clearly understand; and in fact this is what they would have wanted.

Some of the proposals were not accepted right away and alternative options were negotiated. Sometimes this reached an impasse: For example, despite several options being offered by INASP (e.g. mentoring on producing policy briefs) Grace did not find the suggestions interesting enough and did not engage further. Examples of further support included: RIA who applied for funding to organise a remote workshop to develop a national communication strategy and Picture and OASIS who requested support via remote mentoring. In some of the proposals, mentoring of the network itself was proposed and in others mentoring of the nodes in the network was requested.

Another important boundary in what kind of support was offered highlights an interesting divergence in the aims of the project –at least in the way in which they were presented. In some of the cases where the network had run out of funding only the individuals who participated in the workshop remained involved. IDRC thought the work would help the partners to get further funding in the future and this would be an incentive in itself, however INASP focused specifically on communications for policy influence and not on communications for fundraising.

The mentoring phase of the project was still ongoing whilst the review took place. External experts are facilitating the mentoring phase and therefore the role of INASP has changed from direct implementer to coordinator. The mentor we interviewed had not met the partners in person prior to the training but was introduced to them via the INASP project manager. According to monitoring reports and interviews, mentoring has progressed well even if the contact has been slow to respond and communications has been a challenge.

In an interview with one of the mentors, Pius Sawa, who is focusing on 'how to prepare a press release and stimulate the media', explained: *'It has been a challenging project, it is hard to get people on Skype in time. People are scattered and except for one participant from OASIS they found it hard to make time to speak at one time. Besides the difficult planning the internet connections are also often weak'.*

Mr. Sawa has been working with two of the partners (OASIS and UHIN) mentoring them on what journalists expect in a press release, how to write a successful press release, and how to stimulate the media. He explained that the main challenge has been the different degrees of experience between the

partners. For example, some were used to communicating and do so regularly, while others were less familiar and had not written a press release before. The approach the two organisations took to organising the mentoring varied: one had a single representative who shared information internally after the Skype session while the other engaged a whole group. Mr. Sawa reported that he tried to overcome the differences by preparing the conversations according to the specific levels of each organisation. He taught them how to make journalists excited about their research and focused his work around his own experience as a journalist.

3.7 Management and interaction with the donor
Two different IDRC staff managed the project, as the first one left the organisation during the course of the project. There were challenges handing over the project leadership because many conversations with INASP during the planning phase were informal and had not been written down for the next manager to follow. The change of managers happened in the initial contracting phase and hence this delayed the start of the project.

During the workshop, another senior IDRC representative, Heloise Emdon, also participated. She had a different impression of what the workshop should focus on than what INASP had planned. This led to a conversation between INASP and IDRC which should have taken place before the workshop had been planned and delivered but that, in any case, led to a better shared understanding between both organisations.

The three IDRC contacts that participated in the project have slightly different personal interests and ideas about the project's purpose. This had the effect of creating some confusion (or at least doubt) among the INASP team and the participants.

Interestingly, too, IDRC appears to have included fundraising as an outcome of the communications support. In other words it expected that better communications skills would help them to improve their visibility and win new contracts. This, while not entirely incompatible with the skills that INASP was developing, is not necessarily compatible with INASP's approach and focus.

4. Narrative from a selected number of organisations
INASP was initially engaged to work with seven research networks in the initiative. However one organisation (PANAF) dropped out prior to the needs assessment and two further organisations did not participate in the workshop. In the research for this review we contacted all organisations but only received feedback from the five active ones. UHIN, RIA and GRACE were interviewed on the phone and PICTURE and OASIS provided feedback by email. In the narrative below we outline the experience of UHIN, RIA and GRACE in some detail and provide insights into the lessons discussed in the interviews. The feedback from PICTURE and OASIS is more brief but still illustrative. UHIN and OASIS are currently receiving mentoring and hence some of the feedback provided by the mentors describes their progress in this

phase. In each section we consider specific lessons and implications from working with each partner.

4.1 UHIN

The Uganda Health Information Network (UHIN) started in 2003 and has since worked in partnership with a number of different organisations. In the ACACIA project UHIN was the lead partner in a wider network.

The ACACIA funding has ended but has been followed up with a new initiative called STRETCH (Strengthening Community Health in Uganda). This new initiative has expanded the number of partners and comes to an end in March 2012. The focus of the new project is to assess to what extent mobile technology can be used to improve preventive and curative services provided by Vilage Health Teams (VHT) at the community level.

Needs assessment: UHIN was invited to participate in the communication support initiative by IDRC and expressed that they were very interested. The initial contact with INASP was made during the initial needs assessment phase when INASP conduced a survey and interviews in order to assess UHIN's communication needs. The needs assessment looked at UHIN's communication materials and provided feedback. UHIN reported that they found the exercise very useful.

Workshop: UHIN sent three representatives to the workshop. The lead contact Berhane Gebru explained that they enjoyed it and learned to develop a plan for how to train other members in their network. During the training they developed a proposal requesting funding to do so, primarily focused on researchers. Unfortunately their proposal was not approved and they assume it was turned down because of funding constraints. This was a disappointment because while UHIN valued the training received it felt that the opportunity to train others was missed.

Berhane Gebru stressed during our interview, the value of meeting the others right at the beginning of the project. They are still discussing possible cooperation opportunities with some of the other participating organisations.

Mentoring: Currently UHIN is receiving remote mentoring on writing press releases and developing communication strategies.

Learning: A key learning for UHIN was the importance that communication has for research initiatives. They often think of communication only after their research has been done. With the initiative they have learned to include communications right from the beginning of a research process: from the planning stages. They are already implementing this in another IDRC funded project.

Lessons and implications:
- UHIN found it very unfortunate that its proposal to train other members of the network was not funded, as it believed the project could have

helped them share their learning with a much wider audience and lead to a higher impact. UHIN never got to know exactly what the problem with its proposal was but expects that it to be due to funding constraints.

4.2 RIA

Research ICT Africa (RIA) is a research network studying ICT policy regulation across all of Africa. The aim of RIA is to inform governmental ICT policy regulation. The organisation is a network of four research staff, admin staff, and 11 associated researchers. ACACIA supported a part of the project RIA is working on – namely a household survey. The ACACIA funding has ended and RIA is continuing their work in other areas.

RIA became involved in the communication initiative after having been approached by IDRC. Communication is a key priority for RIA and so they engaged to improve their current communication work.

Needs Assessment: The first engagement with INASP was during the needs assessment where it was interviewed about their approaches to communication.

Workshop: The second step was the workshop in Johannesburg. RIA found the workshop interesting and useful and learned how to develop a communication strategy, improve their web presence, conduct training, disseminate results using policy briefs, deal with brokers, and how to engage with policy making. These areas are familiar to RIA and they are working on them all the time, but it was a useful revisit.

Mentoring: During our interview with Enrico Calandro he explained that RIA's weakest point is communication at the node level (among their affiliated researchers) and it was at this level they invited INASP to provide support. In their initial proposal requesting for further support they invited INASP to join their network workshop in March. Their proposal focused on capacity building at the node level looking at dissemination and analysing results. It has not yet been confirmed if INASP can join the workshop and support their proposal to take the lessons learned in the workshop forward.

Lessons and implications:
- RIA found the workshop and needs assessment useful and stressed that it underlined some key cross cutting issues in communications. However, RIA also felt that it would have got more out of the project, had the initiative been tailored more to their specific needs.
- Another interesting outcome for RIA was learning about the donor / recipient relationship which they found useful.

4.3 GRACE

GRACE is a research network, fluctuating in terms of size but consisting of approximately 21 teams in 14 countries across Africa and the Middle East.

GRACE engages gender research into information communication technology for empowerment.

GRACE organised itself upon instigation of ACACIA in 2004: a number of ICT and gender scholars and activists decided to collaborate around a shared research focus. Ineke Buskens (whom we interviewed) coordinates the network. Because the ACACIA funding has ended the network is trying to find other ways to continue its work. An open conference is planned in May or June 2012, where the second phase research findings are shared with a wide variety of stakeholders.

GRACE engaged in the discussion about the ACACIA program evaluation at the Dakar conference in September 2009. Subsequently they learnt about the communication initiative. When they received the self-assessment questionnaire from IDRC in 2010 they expressed their interest in the project.

Needs Assessment; GRACE first contacted INASP during the needs assessment. INASP interviewed 5 representatives from GRACE. Ms. Buskens found that the needs assessment was a bit cumbersome and not always relevant. However, what GRACE did learn was that their website could use some development. This was in itself an important learning for them, so that they can now revisit how they present themselves in a more accessible manner.

Workshop: The workshop offered a lot of interesting tools and advice. The only aspect with which the GRACE representative was not really comfortable with was the paradigm for communication within which the INASP team operated: the emphasis on behaviours (something which is on vogue among communication and research uptake initiatives) as a paradigm for communication was not very appealing.

Furthermore, Ms. Buskens expressed: *'We feel slightly misunderstood in our organisational aspect as a Network. The feedback we got before and after the workshop was that they did not really understand us in terms of our organisation. We are an evolving organisation with a very coherent focus but without a central plan, and maybe you have to be a researcher to make sense of that. The strength of INASP is something else – very structured very organised. We don't really fit that approach, we can work with that and learn from it, but such an approach cannot really capture who we are and what we do.'*

This comment is particularly interesting because it illustrates an emerging critique to approaches such as ODI's RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach and others, which emphasise and demand systematic planning. For some organisations, specifically for networks that are still emerging and finding their own functions and structure, imposing systematic processes can limit their dynamism and flexibility. And this can limit their capacity to develop.

However Ms. Buskens also express that the networking aspect of the event was *'delightful'* and she knew most participants prior to the event and so

learned a lot from sharing experiences with them during the workshop. They have however not kept in touch after the event. During the workshop GRACE learned ways in which they can improve their communication and formalised their approach, which was a good outcome. It is also expressed that they now have some good tools and documents to work with.

Follow up mentoring: GRACE developed a proposal requesting assistance in producing a movie for their website to share what they had learned at the workshop. They thought, base don feedback during the workshop, that the participants, INASP, and the IDRC representatives liked the idea, but unfortunately it was found to be beyond what had been planned by INASP and IDRC in terms of the follow up mentoring on offer. GRACE did not follow up an alternative offer from INASP as did not have time to spend to further analyse and unpack how they communicate in the current state of the organisation. It would have preferred to use that time to develop something more practical. They also felt that they did not need the mentoring INASP could provide, because, in their view, their communication context is very particular and they would have benefitted more from an approach that would do more justice to their particular communication needs. GRACE's priority right now is to share what they learned with the rest of their network. They are planning to crystallize the four-day workshop in a three-hour module for the Open Conference when all GRACE researchers will be present.

Lessons and implications:
- Having a tight well-structured programme can be experienced as having an inflexible understanding of communication and organisations and not open to different organisations' needs and perspectives.
- Support may be best delivered by doing rather than training. This can ensure that the organisations gain skills as well as communicate their research in the process; thus killing two birds with one stone.

4.4 PICTURE
The PICTURE representative, Germaine Barnard, reportedly enjoyed participating in the initiative and has learned how to communicate better and more confidently in front of an audience. Moreover she developed better tools to enhance learning in a participatory training setting rather than a standard teaching setting.

Workshop: According to the participant, she improved her communication skills and learned to communicate confidently. She appreciated the group work during the workshop and felt that the participants could learn from each other and realise that other research organisations are struggling with similar issues. The presentations were enriching and fun. In her view, it was one of the best-organised workshops she has attended.

4.5 OASIS
The OASIS representative interviewed, Linda Taylor, explained that she learned practical skills such as developing a press release, a communication strategy, and also obtained a better understanding of the importance of communication for policy influence within her field. Ms. Taylor envisages

using the tools in future work and improving her organisation's communication with its beneficiaries as well as sharing the knowledge with colleagues.

The workshop: Linda Taylor expressed that the workshop was a very positive experience. It was well organised and the content was interesting and appropriate. The facilitation was also excellent. She mentioned the importance of engaging with other attendees and found the networking, the discussion of what was learned at the workshop, and general sharing of experiences invaluable.

Mentoring: She described the interaction with the mentor as informal and useful for her role in the network. She drafted a press release and has received feedback. The practical examples provided have been very helpful and timely, as she had to produce a press release for her organisation, Jembi. OASIS is yet to participate in the mentoring process on 'developing policy documents' this is an area that she and OASIS have little experience in and so is looking forward to learn about.

Communication Strategy: The OASIS team had developed a draft document, but found it hard for their group to develop the strategy collaboratively. The mentor, Juliette Muthey, provided very useful feedback, but editing in a group was difficult.

Recommendations:
• It is recommended that online collective mentoring should be facilitated within a structured approach, as a loosely organised process is difficult to make the most of online.

5. Concluding remarks
Based on our document review and the interviews (written and oral) with INASP, IDRC, and key partner representatives, we can conclude that most partners increased their understanding of the importance of effective communication and learned to think of communication as an integrated part of their research.

Most partners found the needs assessment useful to identify areas where they needed to strengthen their communication efforts. All participants found the workshop valuable, learning a variety of new skills such as how to become better trainers, or using new tools to approach improved communications. In most cases, organisations started taking steps towards developing a communication strategy for their organisation and network. In general, the more advanced research organisations such as UHIN found the workshop to be a good networking event and that the training had refreshed approaches to strategic communication for policy influence. The mentoring effort on communication strategies and press releases has been useful for the two partners involved, both of which believed it would improve future communication efforts.

Overall, these are important achievements but as the project has not yet been completed and the learning has not been fully integrated in the organisations' work, it is too early draw final conclusions on impact. We suggest that a follow up review with a selected number of organisations takes place six months after the mentoring concludes to see if the capacity building has led to sustainable change.

6. Lessons
A number of lessons can be identified in the review:

Diverse organisations with diverse needs: One of the major challenges in the project was that some organisations needed to develop their communication approach from a basic starting point, whereas others were already quite advanced and needed specific technical support to take their communication efforts to the next level. Supporting all organisations via the same initiative has been particularly difficult in the mentoring and workshop phases. Some of the organisations are networks and needed to improve internal communications and to train nodes in the network, whereas others needed more central organisational communication support. A more individual tailored approach might have been more effective.

A sense of professionalism: The INASP approach was well structured and managed, and has resulted in a sense of professionalism and seriousness. The thorough needs assessment and the workshop created a good introduction between the parties and created a positive platform for learning. The approach had a positive impact on the organisations' willingness to engage with the initiative; even though the organisations were either transitioning into other projects or ending their work with IDRC and therefore communication did not always get highest priority.

Requesting further support: Unfortunately, this positive attitude was not rewarded by additional support from IDRC to implement what was learned. The needs assessment and workshop conveyed an impression that this was an important initiative and this translated in some cases into proposals that involved significant investments. Unfortunately the parameters of the support were not well articulated and several of the proposals were turned down in their original form and they could not receive the support they felt they needed the most. One of the partners expressed: *'You build a house and have a roof but lack the windows and doors – could so easy have taken it to the final step to make it a home'* Berhane Gebru, UHIN. Budgetary constraints were not laid out from the outset and the organisations felt disappointed by INASP and the donor, that they were not willing to take what was experienced as the final step to build their communication capacity.

Understanding the organisations: In most cases the needs assessment contributed positively to INASP's understanding of the partners, despite in one case, with GRACE, where the partner did not feel understood. However, the needs assessment contributed to a conversation around needs and that was

a lesson in itself for the organisations. The needs assessment also helped to build an initial rapport between INASP and the partners.

Donor participation. IDRC managers participated in needs assessment and the workshop, even facilitating a presentation. This contributed positively to the partners' interest and engagement with the project. Again, it was unfortunately not followed through in all cases with additional support.

Regional facilitators and mentors: Working with facilitators and mentors with experience from relevant regions and within the communication context where the partners are working had a positive effect on the project. The partners learned from the mentors and enjoyed discussing the specific challenges that they were facing with regional professionals.

Towards a communication strategy: In the interviews the partners expressed some confusion as to why a communication initiative like this was necessary? In one of the interviews a representative of a partner organisation expressed: *'I did not understand that we needed it – we communicate well and do it all the time.'* Following the comments and input from other interviews such as: *'We suggested IDRC to continue the work, but we never talked about communication'* it is evident that it could have been better explained why this initiative was supported and what the aim was. Particularly important would have been to articulate how the development of a communication strategy and building communication capacity is interlinked, as it appears to have been unclear to the partners if the aim was capacity building or development of a strategy. INASP also expressed confusion in this regard, and a lesson for future programming is to clarify how capacity building is attempted to be build, with what tools and why. Initially developing a communication strategy was a concrete output for the project, however that changed during the implementation and not all partners have developed their strategies if they did not find it relevant for their work. The two partner organisations that received mentoring on developing communication strategies have developed their strategic approach to communication. Another challenge in terms of developing communication plans has been that not all the networks are communicating as such, but are coordinating the work of the organisations they work with, and the communication happens at that level. Building the capacity to improve communication capacity in other parts of the networks was particularly important in the project.

Engaging the right people and working with networks: During the initiative INASP talked to network leaders and asked them for senior researchers to interview. It also tried to identify the right people to work with in order to have the highest possible communication impact in the associated organisations. Unfortunately, this priority was less evident because not all organisations have a clear structure, they did not in all cases select communication staff to participate or have enough time allocated to communication to follow up the initiatives to a sufficient extent. This challenge originates from the fact that each organisation is a network of organisations where structure and responsibilities are fluid. The life of the network depends on factors linked to individual organisations as well as the network as such. The individuals who

have participated in the work have learned a lot, but whether the learning has trickled down to the rest of the network is too early to conclude.

Donor management. Not having a shared vision for the initiatives as well as a change of management from IDRC contributed to some confusion with the service provider in terms of what participation they could expect from the donor. IDRC stepped in on several occasions to engage the partners when their participation was not active enough but there was no follow up. Furthermore, the donor's encouragement may have distorted the reasoning for participating: from wanting to learn, to attempting to satisfy the donor. Moreover, unclear parameters around the mentoring support in terms of financial possibilities caused confusion and disappointment with the partners.

Selecting partner organisations: Having a more extensive self assessment including a section encouraging the organisations to describe how they would share new skills within their organisation could have been helpful for understanding how to best build the partners capacity. Also including a section on why the partners wanted to be a part of the project as well as clarifying time and effort the project would demand on them would have created a better base for the project.

Specific learning for online training. Basing mentoring on online training provides a huge challenge for both mentor and participants as connections are poor and communications are challenging. In principle, the idea is positive and ambitious but in reality it showed that the circumstances provided a significant challenge in getting to the aimed results.

Communication is a continuous process. Thinking communication has to happen throughout implementation and needs to be thought into a project from the outset to have best results. Hence improving communication is a constant effort and working with a mentor should to continue over a long period of time. This project just initiates that process but the real need is to remain involved and keep having communication as a part of the flow of continuous thinking.

7. Recommendations

Based on our findings and lessons, the following recommendations categorised according to *planning and design, implementation and follow-up, and management* are made for future research communication capacity building projects:

Planning and design – invest in the very first step

- *Clear expectations 1*: The lack of clarity on the actual aim with the project has been expressed amongst the most advanced communication partners and the service provider. We recommend that in future projects INASP discusses the objectives with the donor and partners before accepting the task. The needs assessment provides some clarity, but only after the project has been accepted, designed

and initiated. A way to achieve more clarity could be to allocate some resources in house for an initial assessment of what is actually necessary and demanded. No more than is done in discussions with the donor. Pushing back to the client in order to develop a more clear focus is essential at the design and contracting stage. The contract could then include a section in which all parties express:

- o What each expects are the objectives of the initiative
- o What each wants to get out of it; and
- o What each is willing to do to achieve the objectives.

- *Build in flexibility with clarity:* Conditions can change within the lifetime of a project, so it is important also to build this into its design. A clearer understanding of expectations on all parts will also make it easier for the service provider to save time trying to engage partners who are not participating sufficiently. The donor should expect to cooperate closely with the service provider in this process; for instance stepping in when the service provider encourages or askes for support.

- *Timing:* The initiative should start at the beginning of the research programme and not at the end. This will provide sufficient time for the service provider to learn more about the partners and their work and develop a more appropriate support programme. It will also help the partners to test the skills learned and learn from those experiences. Finally, it will ensure that the support is not seen as an add-on and a burden.

- *Monitoring*: We recommend that training in research uptake monitoring is included in future design of similar projects, so that the participating partners can learn how to monitor the effects of their work. This will enable them to understand their success in communication as well as to adjust their approaches if they are not seeing a change.

Implementation and follow-up

- *Needs assessment:* Initiating the project with this assessment provided a strong fundament and some understanding of each of the partner. However greater efforts should be given to exploring the reasons for participation of each of the partners. These should inform the support provided to each.

- *Workshop 1:* Using a mix of regional and service providers as facilitators for the workshop had a very positive outcome: the partners learned from regional knowledge and tools from the INASP facilitators. Having the workshop in the beginning also had a positive impact on the rest of the project; the organisations had met each other, the facilitators and the donors.

- *Workshop 2:* However, the participants for the communications training and the training for trainers sessions need not be exactly the same

ones. Those participating on the training of trainers should participate in the communications workshop.

- *Follow up:* The follow up was a great way to tailor the mentoring according to the needs of the partners and created an incentive for the partners to engage further. This provided a progression and focus of the project, which has had a positive outcome. However, not being able to develop and share clear parameters for what follow up mentoring was possible caused a loss of momentum. In the future, the donor should share the terms for the follow up budget and INASP should encourage this further and offer very clear examples of the types of mentoring support they are able to provide.

- Engaging regional experts in the mentoring had a positive effect on the partners engaged as these experts were able to contextualise and address the needs of the organisations. We recommend this to be repeated in future projects.

- *Do not rush*: Finally, we recommend the mentoring to continue over a longer period of time, in a way so that the mentors can be approached in the future by the organisations to ask for advice. Having someone to consult has a positive impact on the organisations continuously to develop their communication approaches. By starting earlier in the research process, the mentors will be able to provide feedback to the partners more than once and on a number of outputs and activities.

Management

- *Donor involvement*: We recommend that the donor should participate more actively in monitoring the support provided and encouraging participants to engage. It should do this in close coordination with the service provider to avoid confusions.

- *Partner driven*: Managing a capacity building project takes significant effort by the service provider but we recommend encouraging the partners to drive the progress further in future programmes. The intention to do so was there in the design of the project, but lack of understanding of the incentives amongst the partners, heavy engagement by the donor, and lack of clarity of parameters of the mentoring were counterproductive in terms of allowing the partners to drive the progress of the initiative.

- *Monitoring and evaluation*: Monitoring and evaluation should be included in the support initiative from the beginning to ensure that any changes in the context are taken into account and lessons from the process are quickly incorporated into new initiatives. This after action review is appropriate for the length of the project but more resources should be allocated for a longer project.

Annex 1: ToR

TERMS OF REFERENCE
ACACIA EVALUATION
NOVEMBER 2011 - JANUARY 2012

BACKGROUND

The ACACIA research programme was scheduled to end by March 2011. As a result, many research partners faced an end to their funding. IDRC felt recipients of their funding needed to think how they could reposition themselves to secure funding from other sources. To help researchers and their organisations better manage changes in the funding environment, ACACIA designed an initiative to help organisations strengthen their capacities to communicate research. the specific objectives of this component were to:

- assist researchers and network leaders in the development of capacities to effectively communicate and reach their target audiences with their message
- assist researchers in the design of communications strategies and the use of tools and tactics for efficient message delivery
- raise the level of awareness and capacity among researchers around issues of communications for influence; the research uptake process (especially, stimulating the demand side); and better use of development research results in policy

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- Assess whether and the extent to which activities and outputs have contributed effectively to the project's objectives
- Evaluate the effectiveness of INASP's approach in building communication capacities amongst researchers and their organisations
- Make recommendations for IDRC's and INASPS's future capacity development for communications work

RECIPIENT

The recipient of the work is INASP

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF WORK

The methodology should include the following components:

- A review of project related literature including IDRC's concept note and INASP's proposal
- Interviews with the IDRC staff responsible for this project, members of the INASP management team and representatives of the research partners (both direct recipients of the training and others in the organisation)

OUTPUTS

- The production of a list of interview questions and interviewees
- a 10-15 page report

INPUTS

Role	Days input
Team leader	**3**
Junior consultant	**7**

TIMEFRAME
The work should take place between December 1st and 7th January

REPORTING
- The consultant will report to INASP
- The team leader will be responsible for the quality of the outputs

Products will be received and approved by INASP's Evidence-Informed Policy Making programme

Annex 2: List of interviews

INASP:

Fran Deans, Project Coordinator
Kirsty Newman, Head of Programme

Partners:

UHIN: Berhane Gebru, Network Coordinator
GRACE: Ineke Buskens, Network Coordinator
RIA: Enrico Calandro, RIA staff
PICTURE: Germaine Bernard, Network Coordinator
OASIS: Linda Taylor, Jemi staff

Mentor:

Pius Sawa, Journalist & Mentor

IDRC:

Silvia Caicedo, Initial Programme Manager
Khaled Fourati, Senior Program Officer