Policy > Action Network
An online resource for people involved in policy in South Africa

From Evidence to Action
A Newsletter of the Policy Action Network (P>AN)

In this first issue of *From Evidence to Action* of 2012, we look at networks and, specifically, the role they play in changing policy. Our feature article, *Getting the most out of policy networks*, examines what a network actually is and what makes them effective. Through the example of the Regional Network on Equity in Health in Southern Africa, EQUINET, our case study further explores how to build networks and how they can be used to influence policy. We also find out more about another successful network, the Policy Action Network, P>AN, and learn how to set up and manage a Community of Practice. And as usual, our newsletter is jam-packed with useful resources, including networks you can join, training opportunities and events.

From Evidence to Action aims to stimulate debate around evidence-based policy-making. If you have anything to contribute towards getting research into policy, and policy into action, whether successful or unsuccessful, please send your submissions to pan@hsrc.ac.za.

Getting the most out of policy networks

"Network" is a word that is bandied about with increasing regularity in this age of communication technology. But has the 'jargonising' of this word through social media like Facebook and Twitter muddied our understanding of what a network actually is and how it works? Do we confuse networks with the platforms they use, whether it's a website or a workshop? And does it matter?

The answer, according to the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) paper *Not everything that connects is a network* by Simon Hearn and Enrique Mendizabal, is yes. "Too often the term 'network' is used to identify the mechanisms that support a network or link its members – whether a secretariat, an email list, an online platform or an event. This may seem a minor grievance but is a symptom of a wider problem. There is rarely a clear enough distinction between the network and its supporting entity. The supporting entity could be, and often is, modelled on a hierarchical organisation or a finite project (albeit one with a very involved board or stakeholders). It can, therefore, be studied and treated as such – its aims and objectives can be projectised, with work plans and projected budgets. But these structures and services are not the network; the network is the people and the relationships between them." The paper goes on to explain that "When we talk about 'setting up', 'creating' or 'developing' networks, we are usually referring to the supporting entity – building a secretariat or initiating a coordinating project – not to the network itself. Since networks are built on the relationships and interactions of their members, we cannot and should not claim to be able to create them in the same way as we create projects or organisations."

HSRC: Learning through networks

Dr Temba Masilela, Deputy CEO of Research at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), has been actively involved in the development of networks and so we interviewed him to find out more about what a network needs to be effective and have an impact on policy. "When I joined the HSRC in 2006, the organisation was very

In this issue

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focused on networks," he explains. "Every research project was required to have an implementation network to ensure there was utilisation of the research findings and Communities of Practice were established to function as networks. For example, the HSRC was a founding member of SAHARA, the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research Alliance (www.sahara.org.za), which was created as a highly successful network that could encompass the whole of Africa and fund research as well as bring researchers together at an annual conference."

Another very effective network which was created by the HSRC was the Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN). "SARPN had a very strong focus on the interface between research, policy and knowledge sharing. It created a network of researchers and policy-makers throughout Africa who were all interested in poverty issues and keen to get access to the latest resources," says Dr Masilela. A dedicated content manager and networking strategist and the fact that SARPN was on the platform of a research organisation that focused its work on poverty were key aspects that made it so successful. Unfortunately, once SARPN was externalised and this platform was removed, it became dormant. However, a new poverty information network based on SARPN is now being explored which will build on SARPN and aims to include additional services that add a learning dimension, which was lacking previously, to the new network."

The Policy Action Network (P>AN), which also falls within the HSRC stable, has been very successful as well. Dr Masilela was personally involved in the setting up of P>AN and explains that their research revealed there was a need for information about public administration and policy. "We decided to create P>AN on this basis, with the five national priorities of poverty, employment, health, education and social cohesion forming the themes of the network. Later, evidence-based policy-making became its focus," he explains. "But making resources readily available and

getting the kind of information that policy-makers really want was the key to P>AN's success."

What makes an effective network?

One of the defining characteristic of successful networks is their flexibility and adaptability. Networks can and should evolve to meet changing needs, as P>AN has done, for example, by moving from just being a dissemination platform, to building partnership and encouraging debate and discussion on current topical issues as well.

Networks should also build capacity for the future. "A key indicator of success is that you are servicing the needs of young people; our future policy-makers, our future researchers," says Dr Masilela. A network that has done this very effectively is the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), which was created by the World Bank. "There are several reasons why the AERC has become such an effective model," points out Dr Masilela. "Not only

has it provided many scholarships to Masters and PhD students and created generations of economists who have been trained in a particular tradition, but it is also both knowledge- and professionally-based and critically, it is well-funded and has scalability because it covers the whole continent."

The issue of secure, dedicated funding is key to what makes a network succeed or fail because many cannot be financially self-sustaining. Successful networks also depend on successful partnerships and the right technical platforms to function. "But a virtual presence by itself will not make you effective," cautions Dr Masilela. "Supporting interventions that make concrete changes in the real world, that's what energises a network and gives it credibility."

TAC: From network to social movement

Perhaps one of the most recognised networks in South Africa is the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). Dominating the news at the time in the fight for antiretrovirals and becoming a household name, the TAC started as a network but went on to become a social movement which radically changed policy direction around the treatment of HIV/AIDS in terms of mobilising popular support, bringing in scientific evidence and making it a global issue. "Critically, they engaged in a big fight and won it – and this is important if a network is to gain the kind of credibility that is required," points out Dr Masilela.

Spotlight on the Policy Action Network

The Policy Action Network, P>AN, (www.pan.org.za) was established in 2007 with the aim of creating a portal which emphasised the 'how to' of policy-making while also gathering illustrative information on important areas of social policy. This phase of building up the portal's content as well as a subscriber base is being consolidated with a focus on partnerships, active engagement and the development of more products and services.

In its development stage, P>AN recognised that:

- It is important to **seek out active partnerships and collaborations** with organisations which have similar objectives.

- There is a **need for a governance structure** which provides expert advice, contributes to the building of a network and validates the project.
- Any **additional functionalities** such as discussion groups should be facilitated by the P>AN project team to ensure continuity.
- **Communication should be improved** both within and outside the HSRC to raise the profile of P>AN.
- There should be P>AN **champions** among researchers, policy makers and practitioners.
- A **formal review of progress** made should be undertaken and there should be ongoing reflection and learning.

In the past two years, a successful partnership between P>AN and the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) led to the publishing of the first series of this newsletter, which will be carried forward by the HSRC.

P>AN has also collaborated with UNICEF around the establishment of a mini website, P>AN: Children, which will focus on child rights and equity and the identification of successful policies as well as policy gaps. This site will go live in the next few months.

P>AN is interested in partnering with organisations and other networks as part of the second phase of its development and welcomes ideas, which can be submitted to pan@hsrc.ac.za.

Case Study:
EQUINET – building an effective network

EQUINET, the Regional Network on Equity in Health in east and southern Africa, is a highly successful network made up of institutions that include professionals, civil society members, policy-makers, parliamentarians and state officials in east and southern Africa. It aims to advance and support health equity and social justice through sharing information and experience, research, building critical analysis and skills, and networking and building strategic alliances. The EQUINET steering committee, drawn from the leadership of the different areas of work on the network, governs and steers the work of the network. Cluster leads coordinate and manage the five clusters of work on social empowerment; fairly resourcing health systems; global policy engagement; equity watch; and country networking.

P>AN spoke to EQUINET coordinator and director of the Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC), Dr Rene Loewenson, to try and understand more about building effective networks and the impact they can have.

Why was the network originally set up and how has it grown?

Post-independent east and southern Africa has had a longstanding policy commitment to equity in health. The southern Africa regional meeting in 1997 on 'Equity in Health—Policies for Survival in Southern Africa' in Kasane, Botswana, recognised the need to translate this commitment into analysis, policy and practice. EQUINET was formed in 1998 to work in the region

and support the newly formed SADC health sector in doing this. From a small network of institutions from within southern Africa, EQUINET has expanded to cover 16 countries in east and southern Africa and several thousand people have been involved in EQUINET training, research, policy dialogue and information activities. Since then, demand on the network and its members has grown as it has emerged as a credible and accessible source of information, skills and publications from within the region for institutions promoting health equity oriented policies and programmes in east and southern Africa.

Since 2006, EQUINET has aimed to shape, inform and support the development and implementation of policy measures and capacities to revitalise, build and consolidate national health systems that are:
- Based on principles of universality, comprehensiveness and solidarity;
- Centred on a strong state and public sector in health;
- Organised around the active participation and involvement of communities within a democratic system;
- Delivering on the social right to health.

What kind of activities is the network involved in?

The network carries out analysis of "what works" and brings to light the deficits in and blocks to equity oriented policies and programmes. It also seeks to transfer, disseminate and use the existing body of evidence to promote good practice, engage on policy and nourish capacities and strategic alliances. EQUINET also networks people to overcome isolation, give them a voice, and promote exchange and cooperation using bottom-up approaches built on shared values. It fosters a forum for dialogue, learning, sharing of information and experience, and critical analysis to build knowledge, shape effective strategies, strengthen its voice nationally, regionally and globally, and through strategic alliances, influence policy, politics and practice towards health equity and social justice.

Through its consortium institutions, the network stimulates and supports research, publishes a number of technical publications which are available on its website (www.equinetafrica.org), and provides training, methods workshops and mentoring. Every four to five years, a regional conference is held and various communications tools are used to disseminate and share information, including a monthly newsletter, policy briefs, posters, presentations and inputs to strategic forums.

Does the regional focus of EQUINET bring any specific challenges?

Working regionally brings more opportunities than challenges, including for exchange of capacities, best practice, multi-country work, policy dialogue and exchange, social networking and global health diplomacy. The network engages with regional policy bodies and the work is based at local and country level, but connected regionally for this nourishing exchange. It does raise challenges in ensuring communication, meetings and dialogue across countries, but we have addressed this through information tools such as our website, newsletters and mailing lists, as well as through periodic meetings and the regional conference.

You also have an equity focus; does this make you an advocacy network that goes beyond information sharing?

An explicit focus on issues of health equity, or the unfair, avoidable or remediable differences in health among population groups, is a matter of social justice and calls for evidence, perspective, consciousness, engagement, activism and solidarity. Therefore, while EQUINET contributes to new knowledge on equity in health through research and reviews of evidence, the evidence and policy proposals from its work have been presented and used in national, regional and global policy and planning forums; in community level health literacy training; in civil society and parliament networks within and across countries; and in interactions with international agencies. EQUINET aims to carry out analysis of "what works" as well as make visible the deficits in and blocks to equity oriented policies and programmes. It also seeks to transfer, disseminate and use the existing body of evidence generated to promote good practice, engage on policy, and nourish capacities and strategic alliances.

> "Participation in a regional network brings us accessible, relevant information on the region, research support (funds, mentoring and links) and capacity building. We share resources and access new information, skills and resources through the network. The network multiplies personal connections of trust."
>
> EQUINET Steering committee members, April 2008

How do people join and participate in EQUINET?

By being actively involved in any of the areas of work. People also contribute to and receive the newsletter and connect through the information and publications provided in the searchable databases on the website.

What are the benefits of belonging to EQUINET?

Through external evaluation and participatory review we have learned that institutions have reported benefitting from involvement in the network through building greater capabilities for policy analysis and engagement, research, publication, media interaction on health equity and stronger technical skills to advance health equity issues. The institutions in the network are exchanging, communicating and sharing knowledge, experience, information and skills more widely. Beyond these more utilitarian gains, the members of the network have indicated in reviews that they have been able to enhance collectively their individual effectiveness in advancing shared goals of equity and social justice in health. It also needs to be noted that this has motivated a significant level of voluntary, activist and self deter-

mined work by the members of the network as well. Many network members have gone well beyond the available resources to mentor and advance work and dialogue because of their commitment to the policy goals.

Do you think a network can evolve or must it be driven? What makes people actively participate in a network?

I think it is both driven and evolves. The EQUINET steering committee has debated this and the different levels of centralisation and decentralisation of the different functions that the network performs in regularly reviewing how the network is organised and operates. For example, a clear basis of shared values of equity, social justice and solidarity creates a sense of trust and common purpose that frames the network. They draw people to the network. However, activities need to be consciously and purposively built to actively support these shared values and their understanding, reinforce them in the interactions with and within EQUINET, and nourish people through the network. They can be driven from many areas of leadership and evolve in different ways.

Leadership is needed in areas of knowledge, perspectives, capacities related to equity, and people benefit from mentor-

ship and widening communities of practice in areas of work. The change and the commitment this brings (within individuals and institutions) leads to processes and work that evolve beyond any 'planned and driven' network activities and open new dimensions and spheres of work. As a values-driven network, there has been a significant level of voluntary, activist and self determined work by the members of the network, so it has also grappled with the weak institutional resources for this in many countries.

Resources also matter. There is no doubt that if the institutions and people in the network are themselves better and more predictably resourced, the network is also stronger. And it is not only what resources, but how they are used, that is important. Organised within key clusters of work, building on work that institutions do by virtue of their values and 'core business' in the region, the network involves mainly self determined activity driven from within its clusters and institutions. Decentralisation to clusters and themes allows for more freedom and less control of the elements within the network and builds autonomy and ownership. However, the network also has processes that connect these activities strategically, including steering committee meetings, cross-cutting strategic planning and regional analyses.

To find out more about EQUINET visit www.equinetafrica.org.

Tools:
Setting up and managing a Community of Practice

Extracted from Building a Community of Practice (ODI, 2001) and The Knowledge and Learning Toolkit (London: ODI, Ramalingam, Ben, 2005)

Communities of Practice (CoP) are informal groups or networks of professionals who share common problems, interests or knowledge, and who communicate with each other about this. They are a great tool if you want to communicate information, evidence or knowledge.

Key ingredients in CoP

- *Purpose.* It is important to have a shared purpose or passion as well as shared needs and clear value potential.
- *Enablers*, which include technology, time, budget, support and incentives.
- *Leadership* of the community.
- *Processes*. People may want to use different means of communicating which is why flexible communication strategies are as important as storytelling and learning conversations.
- *People*. Competencies, affinities, commitment, behaviours and diversity of perspectives are all elements that people bring to communities of practice.
- *Time* (cited as an enabler) is a key issue.

Leadership roles and responsibilities in fostering CoP

The task of a CoP is to contribute to an organisation or sector so that it can do what it does better. They need to move beyond helping each other, to developing a more proactive forward-looking role.
- Leaders have to believe that CoP add value to the core business of an organisation so that they can honestly defend the space needed for communities of practice to function effectively.
- Events should be created to keep the life of the community healthy. A community can be actively nurtured to improve participation and the experiences of members.

- CoP have to be marketed so that levels of participation are improved.
- CoP, often operating in the virtual environment, may become disjointed or confusing and facilitators should ensure that they maintain the discussion's coherence.

Key points and practical tips

A Department for International Development (DFID) good practice guide includes the following sets of useful questions to consider when setting up a CoP (DFID, 2004):

Starting-up a network:
- Have you double-checked your reasons for starting a community/network?
- When should this network become active?
- What type of network will yours be?
- What kind of facilitation will your network need?
- What kinds of behaviours and activities are appropriate to a facilitator?
- What tools and channels of communication can you use for facilitating a network?

*How to involve external participants in networks:*
- Be clear on what the network is for before involving external participants.
- Who exactly are the external participants going to be?
- Who hosts the network?

Sustaining a network:
- What resources has the network got?
- What makes your network valuable to its members?
- How could you revive a faltering network?
- Ensuring that a facilitation role is sustained.

Further resources

- KM4DEV Communities of Practice resource page: www.km4dev.org/modules.php?op= modload&name=DownloadsPlus&file=index&req=viewdownload&cid=20.
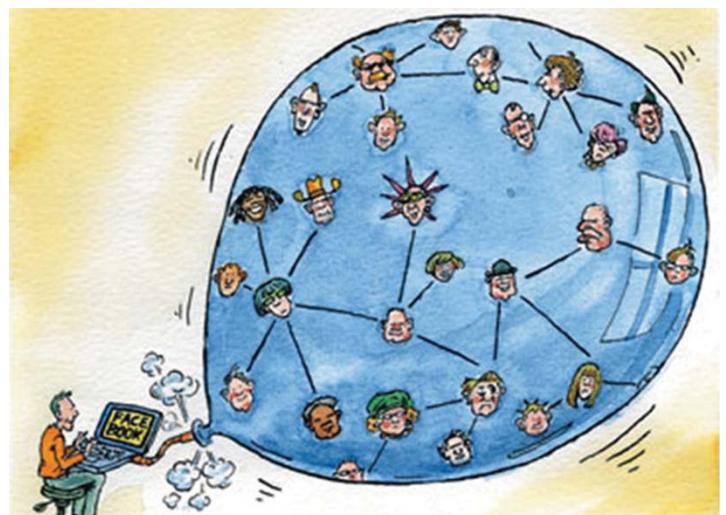
- Introduction to Communities of Practice, in the report of the Bellanet Workshop, Brighton (De Merode, Louis. 2000): http://www.km4dev.org/modules/Downloads/uploads/Workshops/ Brighton_2000/KMBrightonReport2.doc.

- Building effective research policy networks: Linking function and form: http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/146.pdf.

Resources

Networks that you can participate in

African Community of Practice on Managing for Development Results

http://copmfdrafrica.ning.com/

AfCoP is a virtual community of over 1400 members from 87 countries, of which 41 are African. Members work for African governments, civil society and as independent results experts and aim to build African capacity through sharing experiences, networking and building strong learning relationships between practitioners in Africa and around the world.

Archival Platform

http://www.archivalplatform.org/

The Archival Platform aims to raise public awareness of the role and value of the archive, particularly in relation to social justice, the processes of reconciliation, redress and social cohesion and the exercise of democratic government. It seeks to achieve this through a strategy that involves networking, advocacy and research and the development of public interventions.

Arterial Network

http://www.arterialnetwork.org/

The Arterial Network aims to build and further develop effective, sustainable national, regional and continental networks within and across arts disciplines to play advocacy and lobbying roles within countries, regions, on the continent and internationally as appropriate, and in support of the African creative sector.

Capacity.org: a gateway for capacity development

http://capacity.org/capacity/opencms/en/index.html

Capacity.org is a resource portal for the practice of capacity development and the home of the Capacity.org journal. The network aims to facilitate access to online resources including the latest research findings, analytical frameworks, policy debates, practical experiences, toolkits, networks and communities of practice.

Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa

http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?&lang=en

CODESRIA is a membership-based research body which focuses on the emergence of a pan-African community of researchers, the protection of their intellectual freedom and autonomy in performing their duties and the elimination of barriers regarding language, discipline, region, gender and generation.

EQUINET East and Southern Africa

http://www.equinetafrica.org/

The Regional Network on Equity in Health in east and southern Africa is a network of professionals, civil society members, policy-makers, state officials and others within the region who have come together as an equity catalyst, to promote and realise shared values of equity and social justice in health.

Fahamu – networks for social justice

http://www.fahamu.org/about/

Fahamu supports the strengthening of human rights and social justice movements by promoting innovative use of information and communications technologies, stimulating debate, discussion and analyses, publishing news and information and developing and delivering educational courses. Fahamu also publishes the weekly electronic news and information forum for social justice in Africa, Pambazuka News (http://www.pambazuka.org/en/).

Harmonization for Health in Africa

http://www.hha-online.org/hso/

HHA is a collaborative initiative to provide regional support to governments in Africa in strengthening their health systems. It hosts 22 Communities of Practices which bring expertise together and create a structured environment where requests for technical assistance and documents and tools can be made and responded to, and where expert knowledge can be shared with relevant counterparts.

Knowledge for Health

http://www.k4health.org/

K4Health promotes the use and dissemination of evidence-based, accurate, and up-to-date information to improve health service delivery and health outcomes. Members can participate in online forums and post messages to the toolkit discussion boards or visit the Implementing Best Practices Knowledge Gateway to participate in hundreds of Communities of Practice and eForums.

National Welfare Social Service and Development Forum

http://www.forum.org.za/

The Forum is a key coordinating body in civil society with a history of action on matters affecting social welfare in South Africa and beyond.

It provides a space for dialogue on matters that concern civil society and citizens and thought leaders can join this dialogue by submitting their opinions to the Forum.

Observatory of Cultural Policies in Africa
http://www.ocpanet.org/
OCPA monitors cultural trends and national cultural policies in the region to enhance their integration in human development strategies through advocacy, information, research, capacity building, networking, co-ordination, and cooperation at regional and international levels.

Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa
http://www.ossrea.net/
OSSREA is a regional membership-based research and capacity-building organisation whose mission is to promote dialogue and interaction between researchers and policy-makers in eastern and southern Africa with a view to enhancing the impact of research on policy-making and development planning.

Training opportunities

K4Health Online Communities of Practice eLearning Course
http://www.k4health.org/e-learning/communities-of-practice
This course aims to give an overview of online Communities of Practice, including the uses, benefits, and challenges of creating and maintaining them and is aimed at public health professionals. To take the course, you will need to register for a K4Health eLearning account *(http://k4healthelearning.org/NewUser.asp)* separate from the K4Health.org website account. The course is free and requires only a valid email address.

Events and opportunities

VII International conference on cultural policy research
http://www.iccpr2012.org/index.php?lang=en
9-12 July 2012
Aims to address the challenge of rethinking cultural policy analysis from the broader parameters of the relationship between culture and politics.

Internet, politics, policy 2012: Big data, big challenges?
http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/ipp2012/
20-21 September 2012
An academic conference that will subject the relationship between the internet, politics and policy to multi-disciplinary scrutiny.

2012 International development conference: Integrating research, policy and practice
http://www.idc2012.org.nz/
3-5 December 2012
An international forum for development scholars, researchers and practitioners to explore the linkages between research, policy and practice.

This newsletter is supported by the HSRC and aims to inform policy-makers, researchers and development practitioners in South Africa of emerging developments, results and good practice in the application of evidence-based policy-making. The HSRC has attempted to make the information in this newsletter as accurate as possible and it is intended for personal and/or educational use only. It is provided in good faith without any express or implied warranty. The content of this newsletter can in no way be taken to reflect the views of these partners, including the HSRC.

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