

Challenges faced by African organizations in knowledge sharing: the case of the African Population and Health Research Centre

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Introduction

Knowledge abounds in Africa; knowledge that, if well communicated to policy makers, program implementers, donors, the media, and the people of Africa, would inform their fight against poverty. Indeed, a lot of money is spent on generating this knowledge, which many times, only ends up on library shelves, not only inaccessible to many of the mentioned audiences, but also in not-easy-to-use/consume formats (e.g. bulky scientific reports). This paper looks at challenges faced by knowledge generating organizations in Africa in sharing their knowledge. Specifically, the paper focuses on the challenges that the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) faces in its dissemination efforts within Africa and beyond. Before proceeding however, the paper will briefly look at the role of research and why it is important to communicate effectively.

The role of research

Research identifies and quantifies problems in society. In many cases, it goes further to suggest strategies for solving the identified problems. This means that without research it becomes hard to solve problems because of the lack of relevant information such as the causes of the problems, the extent of the problems, and the possible ways of addressing them. Dabis *et al.* (2002) attributes the great improvement in child health in the past ten years to research, which has quantified child health problems and identified strategies for addressing the problems. This makes it critical to effectively communicate research to the targeted audiences who can address the problem identified by research. Hovland (2005) argues that what we need is not *more* communication but *better* communication of our research in order to influence development. Hovland further argues that “information is a tool that helps people help themselves, in a ‘fishing-pole-rather-than-fish’ sort of way”. In a nutshell, effective communication of research is very crucial in development.

APHRC in brief

APHRC is a pan-African, non-governmental research organization. The Centre was established in 1995 as a Population Policy Research Fellowship program of the Population Council, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. In 2001, it became an autonomous institution with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. APHRC

conducts research on policy-relevant issues of population and health afflicting sub-Saharan Africa. The main purpose is to generate knowledge that will inform policy and programs in the region to improve the well being of Africans. APHRC's mission is shown in Text Box 1.

Text Box 1: APHRC's Mission

'Promoting the well-being of Africans through policy relevant research on population and health'

Source: *APHRC Brochure*, 2004

APHRC's specific objectives are to:

- Contribute to Science through high impact research projects and publications,
- Inform Policy Decisions with research evidence, and
- Strengthen Research Capacity in sub-Saharan Africa.

To achieve these objectives, the Centre brings together African scholars to take the lead in developing priority research programs and enhancing use of research findings for policy formulation and program improvement in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, the Centre is staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of highly trained scientists, drawn from different parts of Africa (12 African countries), and emphasizes excellence at all levels of its research endeavours. Currently, APHRC employs 64 members of staff, among them: 17 researchers (from different parts of Africa), 12 support staff, 54 data entry clerks and field workers. APHRC's total budget is US\$ 1,550,610 (2004).

The Centre also builds partnerships through collaborative linkages with African and other academic and research institutions to enrich its work and impact. APHRC's research focus is discussed in Text Box 2.

APHRC's knowledge sharing processes

As already mentioned, the Centre's main purpose for being is to inform policy and programs with its scientific evidence. Thus, knowledge sharing is central to the Centre's existence. Policy makers, program implementers, and donors are APHRC's primary audiences. But beyond these three groups, the Centre strives to reach the (study) communities where it works, the scientific community, the mass media, and civil society organizations, among others. APHRC shares its scientific knowledge through:

- International, regional and national workshops (both scientific and general dissemination workshop)
- One-on-one meetings with key stakeholders i.e. policy makers, program implementers, donors, etc
- Publishing in peer-reviewed scientific journals
- Mass media

- In-house publications (quarterly newsletters, fact sheets, policy briefs, working papers, and research reports)
- Internet – Publications posted on the Centre’s website, circulation of publications through email lists and relevant Internet networks.

Text Box 2: APHRC’s research focus

APHRC’s research focus is guided by two themes: (a) clarifying changing linkages between **urban health and poverty**; and (b) investigating **emerging population and health issues** in sub-Saharan Africa.

Urban Health and Poverty - The combined impacts of rapid urbanization, increasing poverty and deteriorating health conditions in African cities pose serious constraints to development efforts in the region. To guide policies aimed at improving the well-being of the urban poor, APHRC has instituted a program of research and action to determine, implement and evaluate interventions for improving the deteriorating health and livelihood conditions of Africa’s urban poor.

Emerging Issues - Africa is typified by unique demographic and health indicators such as high population growth, young age structure and the severe impacts of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Centre is committed to increasing global understanding of key aspects of the social, economic, and cultural environment that maintain these conditions.

The Centre’s specific areas of focus under these two research themes include: health and social equity, reproductive health, HIV and AIDS, adolescents’ transition to adulthood, schooling, fertility transitions, maternal and child health, mortality and cause of death, migration dynamics, aging, and food security.

Source: *APHRC Brochure*, 2004

Besides, APHRC partners with policy makers in some of its research undertakings, which boosts uptake of research findings in informing policy.

In all its efforts to share knowledge generated from its studies, APHRC encounters a number of barriers that stand in its way to reach all intended users. As the Centre grows and strives to broaden the reach of its scientific knowledge, challenges that limit its knowledge sharing efforts remain.

Internal challenges

Internal challenges (in this paper) refer to challenges inherent in the Centre’s current structure and operations that limit knowledge sharing.

Inadequate staffing in the Communications Department

APHRC has one member of staff who handles all communication and dissemination matters (including library and website management). For a Centre that works on several research projects (currently has nine research projects), all of which require having their findings synthesized for non-academic audiences and disseminated, one communication person is far from being sufficient. The result is that many projects, upon completion, only disseminate their findings through a one-time dissemination workshop. Thus, due to inadequate staffing, other channels of getting findings out to non-academic audiences are, in many cases, not explored.

Also, the one person in communication is not able to produce short easy-to-read pieces from all the project reports; as such, many project reports are disseminated in their bulky formats which are not user-friendly to many audiences.

Limited relevant information and communication technologies (ICTs)

While APHRC has average information and communications technology to enable it to carry out its dissemination activities, it would benefit a lot from such ICTs as teleconferencing equipment. Currently, the Centre has a website (where it posts publications) and it uses e-mailing in circulation of e-publications and other communications. Teleconferencing would enable APHRC to link easily and discuss its findings with many of its stakeholders in developed countries i.e. academic/research institutions, donor bodies, and international policy makers, among others.

Inappropriate packaging of publications

Marshall McLuhan (1964) introduced the paradox 'the medium is the message', and looking at this literally, the medium in which information is packaged can determine whether your messages get to the intended audience or not. For example, most policy makers, journalists, and community members among whom the study is done, are not likely to read bulky research reports, even if these contained very important information. These groups need short easy-to-read and understand formats of the research reports. APHRC has mainly published its findings in research reports (peer-reviewed journal papers, book chapters, working papers, and research reports). To be precise, APHRC has to date published 47 peer-reviewed journal articles, eight book chapters, 31 working papers, and four research reports. These are commendable efforts in reaching scientific audiences, especially for such a young institution. However, of these research reports, only very few have been synthesized into easy-to-read formats for non-scientific audiences. None of the 31 working papers has a short synthesized piece for non-scientific audiences; of all the 47 peer-reviewed journal articles, only one has a fact sheet; no book chapter has a short piece; however, all the four research reports have policy briefs. This simply illustrates that APHRC focuses its findings mainly to scientific audiences, and minimally to non-scientific audiences, yet these are the people who can really act to solve the problems studied.

Limited networking (with advocacy groups)

For research organizations, networking with advocacy groups is very important, especially because many of them (research organizations) do not, in most cases, feel obliged to carry out advocacy fearing conflict of interest. Thus, networking with outreach and advocacy groups (including the mass media) is very important in getting research findings out there to policy makers and program implementers. Apart from having links with a few advocacy groups in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda, APHRC does not have any other links with advocacy groups in other African countries; perhaps the only link APHRC has in other African countries is that it circulates its publications to stakeholders in these countries. This has greatly limited the reach of its research findings, especially in countries where it has no advocacy links. APHRC's links with advocacy groups in the five countries mentioned above work in such a way that APHRC provides its findings to these groups (country-relevant findings) which inform their advocacy agenda. APHRC works with *Initiative Privée et Communautaire de Lutte Contre le VIH/SIDA* (Burkina Faso), Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana (Ghana), Youth Net and Counselling (Malawi), and Panos Eastern Africa (Uganda).

Inadequate prioritization for communication and dissemination

APHRC has not given communication and dissemination activities adequate priority, especially if you compare this to the priority given to knowledge generation (research) activities. Granted, an organization cannot carry out effective dissemination without credible research findings, and this is why research activities have been highly prioritized at the Centre. But what the Centre is now realizing is that it needs to prioritize dissemination as well, because credible findings that are not reaching policy makers, program implementers and community members, may not be very useful. This inadequate prioritization is reflected in terms of staffing and other resources dedicated to communication and dissemination activities.

External challenges

External challenges refer to those challenges existing in the environment in which APHRC operates.

Inadequate funding

Inadequate funding is a big problem at the Centre especially considering that the institution is quite young and it is only now that it is struggling to diversify its funding sources. This has greatly affected communication and dissemination activities. For instance, most funding for research projects only provide for the publication of a research report, thus there is no funding for publication of policy briefs, fact sheets, etc. Also, most funding for research projects only provide for one dissemination workshop upon completion of the project, hence there is no funding for further dissemination of the research findings to other useful forums such as regional and

international meetings of policy makers, among others. Inadequate funding has thus played a role in limiting the reach of the Centre's research findings.

Mass media-related problems

The mass media are very important channels of getting research findings out to various audience groups. However, the mass media role in dissemination in Africa has been limited by a number of factors.

Mass media's over-concentration on politics

The mass media in Africa have prioritized political news at the expense of other news/information. Many times, journalists do not turn up at research functions mainly because there is an interesting political event that "they must cover". An example here is a workshop that APHRC held on "Understanding African sexuality and how it is impacting on health outcomes" in May 2005. Most media houses in Nairobi (local, regional and international) were invited and a number (five) actually confirmed that they will cover the event. But the night before the opening of the workshop, Kenya's first lady stormed into a media house (the Nation Media Group) and camped there for five hours complaining of biased media coverage of her family. On the workshop day, only two journalists from two media houses came to cover the workshop, some were busy following the first lady's moves to see what she would do next, while others were busy preparing analyses of the first lady's actions!

Sloppy coverage of scientific evidence/events

Another media related challenge that has hindered APHRC's dissemination of scientific evidence is the lack of specialized training for journalists covering population and health issues. This results in sloppy coverage of APHRC's events (coverage that loses the main message) or sometimes journalists do not turn up for an event at all. An example of sloppy coverage of an APHRC event is shown in Text Box 3, where the journalist chose to focus on AIDS whereas the workshop was on 'Understanding African sexuality and how it is impacting on health outcomes'; not to mention that APHRC had prepared a clear and focused press release, and this particular writer held a one-on-one interview with the APHRC Executive Director after he had opened the workshop.

Text Box 3: Support AIDS Research, Centre urges State

The Government has been urged to support HIV/AIDS research.

The Africa Population and Health Research Centre yesterday also called for open discussions on sexuality.

'There is need to change the teaching method on AIDS and how to apply this knowledge,' said Mr. Alex Ezeh, the centre's executive director.

Ezeh said misleading perceptions had undermined the AIDS war in sub-Saharan Africa.

The official was speaking during a two-day workshop on sexuality at a Nairobi hotel.
Source: *The Standard*, May 4, 2005, Nairobi.

Low literacy levels in Africa

In 2004, UNESCO estimates showed that 40% of Africa's population was illiterate (UNESCO, 2004). Even among the 60% who were estimated to be literate, they included those who are semi-literate. This implies that many Africans are not able to read or understand speeches in English/French. This presents a challenge to APHRC as it has put a lot of emphasis on conventional written mediums of dissemination i.e. publications. Yet many of its audiences (including parliamentarians, community members, etc) cannot read and understand the findings. This calls for a strong back-up of technical publications with oral-oriented dissemination (T.V., radio, meetings with these groups, public speeches, community *barazas* (meetings), etc). APHRC has not put much emphasis on these forms of dissemination, because looking at its 2005 dissemination efforts, the Centre held one meeting with parliamentarians, two community health days (where dissemination of findings was done through drama, song and dance, puppetry, etc.), had two radio coverage events (news spots), and no TV appearance. This was against nine peer-reviewed journal papers, four book chapters, one working paper, and four newspaper appearances.

Language barriers

Another challenge that stands in the way of APHRC's dissemination efforts is language. Different parts of Africa use different official languages. For instance, some countries are francophone, whereas others are Anglophone; this means that all communication/dissemination products must be presented in these two languages to reach all important stakeholders on the continent, yet funding is limited. Note that all the mentioned APHRC publications are in English, which means that findings are not accessible to stakeholders in francophone African countries.

Poor telecommunications infrastructure and limited use of ICTs

Apart from South Africa, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have unreliable telecommunications infrastructure making IT-based communication efforts less fruitful. For instance, only about 23 million out of 915 million Africans are estimated to be using the Internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2006). This means that whereas a Centre like APHRC has its publications posted on its website, only a handful of people who would find these publications useful have access to them. It is not news that most government departments in Africa have no reliable Internet access, yet policy makers are one of APHRC's key audiences.

Conclusions and the way forward

Africa faces such unique barriers to knowledge sharing like poor infrastructure, low literacy, etc. APHRC, therefore, needs to boost its use of non-conventional communication methods (e.g. face to face meetings with policy makers, make use of existing forums and networks to reach policy makers, network with advocacy groups, mass media, etc.) to be able to reach relevant policy makers, program implementers, the media, and the communities, among other audiences. To do this, APHRC needs to

first accord as much commitment to knowledge sharing as it accords to knowledge generation. Secondly, it needs to greatly diversify its funding and be able to expand its communications department. With an expanded and well-structured (in terms of staffing) communications department, the Centre will be able to produce more short publications targeted at non-scientific audiences. It will also be able to maximize the use of the various mass media and folk media, in its dissemination efforts, as well as take full advantage of existing forums and networks of policy makers to reach them with its findings. This will enable APHRC to reach more non-scientific audiences, most of whom are better able to address the problems that the Centre studies.

Other specific ways that APHRC could explore to enhance the reach of its knowledge sharing efforts include:

Work closely with regional policy bodies - There are a number of bodies in the region that APHRC could interact with meaningfully to get its research evidence to inform their policies and programs. Such bodies could also provide links to key policy makers in individual sub-Saharan African countries. Such bodies include the African Union (AU), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), relevant United Nations offices in Africa, East African Community Legislative Council, Southern Africa Development Community Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), among others. With established links with these bodies, APHRC could explore participation in their forums (e.g. giving a brief talk on urbanization in Africa during an AU conference for Ministers of Health, and then circulating policy briefs or fact sheets to participants of AU forums, etc). AU, for instance, has the Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) which provides opportunity for Africa's civil society to work with the Union. This is an opportunity that APHRC and other research organizations in Africa should explore to use the AU links to reach member country policy makers.

Mass media - Even though APHRC works closely with the mass media in Kenya, it needs to expand these relations to regional media bodies across Africa. The Centre can do this through such efforts as organizing short training courses for journalists who cover issues of population and health in Africa; sponsoring regional journalism awards for such categories as population and health; among others. This will enable the Centre to not only create awareness among African journalists of its work, but also to establish contacts with various journalists in the region and be able to send its news releases directly to them. The Centre's past experience in Kenya in working with journalists through organization of sensitization workshops and site tours have shown that such engagements with journalists can result in increased coverage of health and population issues. For instance, a sensitization workshop on inequities in health in Nairobi organized for journalists in 2004 by APHRC resulted in spot news coverage in two local TV stations, three radio stations, and two newspapers.

Networking with advocacy groups working in the region – Advocacy and outreach groups are critical when it comes to research dissemination. It is important to note that

sometimes advocacy groups lack scientific evidence to push their agendas, and thus, they need research organizations just as much as research organizations need them. APHRC needs to identify relevant advocacy and outreach groups in the sub-Saharan region and establish links that will feed its research evidence into their advocacy campaigns. Such groups could be human rights bodies, women associations/bodies carrying out advocacy, among others.

On the whole, APHRC's efforts alone cannot solve all its dissemination challenges. Thus, African governments, on their part, need to prioritize automation and use of IT in their ministries and departments, as well as, invest in developing reliable country-wide telecommunications infrastructure. Multilateral and bilateral bodies (e.g. the World Bank, African Development Bank, NEPAD, World Health Organization, etc.) in the region need to recognize these knowledge sharing challenges faced by research organizations in Africa, including APHRC, and work on ways of providing forums to share knowledge generated locally. These could be, for example, annual knowledge sharing conferences for research organizations in the area of population, health, and urbanization, among others.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges faced by the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) in its knowledge sharing efforts across Africa and beyond. It also suggests some possible ways of addressing the challenges. Among the key challenges that APHRC faces in knowledge sharing are inadequate funding and staffing, mass media's over-concentration on politics, low literacy levels, language barrier, poor telecommunications infrastructure, inadequate technologies, and limited networking. Other challenges include use of inappropriate packaging of knowledge, and low prioritization of knowledge sharing activities.

As a way forward, this paper concludes that APHRC needs to go beyond the use of conventional methods of knowledge sharing. APHRC needs to work closely with bodies such as the African Union, New Partnership for Africa's Development, relevant United Nations bodies, on ways of reaching policy makers, among other stakeholders in the region. It should establish linkages with advocacy groups, including the media. More importantly, APHRC needs to accord as much commitment to knowledge sharing as it accords to knowledge generation. The paper calls on African governments to prioritize automation in their departments, and improve telecommunication infrastructure; and on multilateral and bilateral bodies to sponsor knowledge sharing forums for research organizations and policy makers.

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