

# Using communication to strengthen research

With this special issue of the Newsletter, the R4HA team would like to share three stories meant to inspire institutions that would like to innovate their communication strategies. Institutions that want to show how their research impacts on health and that want to attract investors to their work. The stories have been collected and written by Linda Nordling (freelance journalist, based in South Africa), in collaboration with the R4HA team. Enjoy reading!

## STORY 1: Connecting with people to influence national and local policymaking

### AFRICA POPULATION HEALTH RESEARCH CENTER

- Work on your reputation as a trustworthy producer of timely, reliable and actionable advice
- Engage with policymakers' values on a personal level to catch their attention and motivate action
- Respond to clear government demand for evidence rather than bombarding policymakers with information they didn't ask for at a time when it may not be a priority

The Africa Population Health Research Center (APHRC) in Nairobi, Kenya is a donor-funded research institution that produces policy-relevant research on population, health, education, urbanisation and development across Africa. Since its establishment in 2001 it has succeeded in influencing a number of health-related policies. In the process, it has learnt a lot about what it takes to get evidence into policymaking in a resource-poor environment.

The centre cut its teeth on a large study of life in the Kenyan slums (The Nairobi Cross-sectional Slum Survey, 2000), which ended up filling a policy information gap and resulted in a number of actions both nationally and locally in the country. When APHRC started out, there was very little information about population and health dynamics in the urban slums of Africa. It initiated the huge study that compared the slums in Nairobi with the status of healthcare and education, say, in rural areas of Kenya.

The study made the surprising discovery that conditions in the slums were much worse. This was at odds with the dominant school of thought, both in policymaking and in the minds of Kenyans at the time, that there was an urban advantage to living in the city. After the study was published government ministers toured the slums, and set up a budget specifically targeting poor urban areas. The Nairobi city council set up clinics around the slums.

The number of development agencies and more effective policies targeting the slums in Nairobi has skyrocketed, says Ruthpearl Ng'ang'a, APHRC's communications manager. "Even just looking at the indicators coming out of Nairobi's informal settlements in 2000, and comparing them with today, there's a big difference," she says.

The slum study addressed an important information gap for Kenyan policymakers, but it also established APHRC's reputation as a trustworthy producer of timely and actionable research-based advice.



This has resulted in a long and fruitful dialogue with the region's policymakers. "They demand the evidence, and we respond to their needs," Ng'ang'a explains.

Everybody at APHRC—from the researchers to the senior management staff—are involved in carrying out this dialogue. But a particular role falls to the seven-strong policy and communications team, which ensures that the centre's communications activities are coordinated and in line with the overarching goals of the organisation. The team works with the centre's researchers to develop a strategy for communicating each research programme's priorities, guided by the centre's communication strategy.

However, with policymaking and political positions changing hands regularly, the dialogue needs continual modification. There is no way around it, says Ng'ang'a, "In order to keep the dialogue going you have to approach newly appointed policymakers as early as you can, and make sure you are on their radar from the get-go. As there are many others often vying for the new person's attention, it pays to be innovative in your strategies."

APHRC had to be creative in March 2013, when the government changed in Kenya following a general election. There was a new cabinet secretary of education, one that nobody at APHRC had worked with before.

"We sat down in a meeting and thought, how we can engage him about primary education?" says Ng'ang'a. With her colleagues, she drew up an unorthodox plan. "We sent a photographer to the primary school the cabinet secretary had gone to when he was a child. We printed the photograph along with a congratulatory message, framed it, and wrapped it nicely. The photo was delivered to the cabinet secretary together with a new report we had prepared on primary education. He got it two months after he arrived in office," says Ng'ang'a.

It was a "small, non-essential gesture", she says. But it worked. When APHRC later contacted the minister, he knew exactly who they were. He agreed to launch the primary education report in person, prefacing his

speech at the occasion with the story of the photograph and how the report arrived with him. He went further and wrote a memo requiring all directors in his ministry to read the report. Barely two months later, the ministry of education and the teachers' service commission were implementing the recommendations of the research report.

APHRC may have achieved a lot in the past two decades, but it still faces challenges every day in keeping the lines of communication open between decision-makers on the one hand, and the centre's researchers on the other. The latter are susceptible to the pressures of academic research life, which often prizes publication in learned journals over communicating their findings to actors outside academia.

The centre also has to try to stay one step ahead of the policymakers, to make sure it has the capability to carry out research on emerging areas as and when the decisions-makers want information. To do that, you must understand the processes of policymaking, Ng'ang'a says. "There is no point providing detailed information before the policymakers are ready to act and it is much more difficult to bring in the evidence when the policy direction has already been determined. You need to

understand where they are in the policymaking process, and respond to it," she says.

The communication of evidence to policymakers is central to APHRC's vision, she adds: That the people of Africa enjoy the highest possible quality of life through policies and practices informed by robust scientific evidence. The centre's success is, she hopes, raising awareness across the continent

of successful ways of utilising evidence in policy and practical decision-making.

"I think over time, as we have one success after the other, we will be able to convince others of the value of strategically and regularly engaging policymakers. It's not just enough to produce knowledge. Researchers need to understand what policymakers need, and engage with them about that evidence, while policymakers need to tell researchers about the evidence they need," she says.

## STORY 2 - Using communication to reposition an institution for fundraising

### STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

- Start with a clear plan of what the money will achieve—try to be specific.
- Identify the target audience and use professional communicators to create attractive marketing material.
- Get the entire faculty/staff behind the campaign.

When South Africa's Apartheid regime gave way to democratic rule, Stellenbosch University in the Cape Winelands faced an identity crisis. A former bastion of the ruling minority, the university's history was reflected in the language dominating the campus (Afrikaans) as well as the demographic profile of its alumni and students.

Many faculty and alumni wanted to keep it that way. But when Russel Botman took up the post of vice-chancellor and rector in 2007, he saw a problem for the future. The university's profile jarred with the new multicultural South Africa. Its perceived identity not only discouraged many young South Africans from applying to the university—it also posed a challenge for fundraising both nationally and internationally.

With the help of staff and external communications agency Ogilvy, Botman drew up a new positioning strategy for the university. The HOPE Project sought to take the university's strong academic reputation and re-purpose it to focus on five key challenges facing Africa, namely:

- Eradicating poverty and related condition
- Promoting human dignity and health
- Promoting democracy and human rights
- Promoting peace and security
- Promoting a sustainable environment and a competitive industry

The university also set out to reposition itself as a multilingual institution, accessible not only to all South Africans, but to academics and students from the rest of the African continent.

"Botman wanted the university's image to be referenced by the future, not be stuck in the past," says Annamia van den Heever, director of the university's development office, who was on the team conceptualizing and implementing the HOPE Project.

The team arrived at the HOPE concept by reflecting on the core mission of a university, she says. "Based on Prof Botman's vision, we established the idea that whatever a university does is forward looking, and creates hope. We decided to look at the big problems in the world in research, and show how Stellenbosch was widening access to students, creating hope for them."

Ogilvy worked with the University's advancement team to put together an integrated branding and communications strategy using innovative marketing web and print media. Brochures for the HOPE Project describing its focus on "Science for Society" referenced the iconography of the region's architecture and natural beauty to attract prospective partners and investors.

The HOPE Project was launched publicly in 2010, along with a fundraising campaign for the university setting an ambitious target of 1.75 billion Rand (approximately US\$250m at the time) to be raised by the year 2015. The communications and fundraising aspects of



the Hope Project was funded by the Stellenbosch Trust, which oversees an endowment fund for the university. The academic and other aspects of the project received seed funding from the university council, making the campaign's budget 320 million Rand over three years.

The campaign has been a success. By November 2013 the university had raised a total of 1.327 billion Rand. This is remarkable considering that the HOPE Project was launched at a time when the financial crisis was taking bites out of both the global and South African economy.

The university has also managed to change its public image, at least judging by the amount and kind of media attention it now receives. The university has seen a significant increase in media coverage, the placement of opinion editorials and a renewed interest in science.

Communication was essential to the HOPE Project's success. Prior to the repositioning, stories about the university in national and local media were often negative, focusing on rifts in the faculty and alumni between reformers and traditionalists. The HOPE Project sought to send out a more positive image of the university. It also targeted English-language newspapers as a way of reinforcing its multilingual brand. The idea was to "change the conversation about Stellenbosch University".

This required a bigger communications team at the university, as well as a number of new skills. The university hired journalists and e-commerce copywriters to write the copy for the HOPE Project website and information packages. It now employs a team of

seven communicators. Academics were also strongly encouraged to communicate their research and engage with media in order to get the name of Stellenbosch into the public space.

Getting the academics on board was an essential aspect of the campaign, says Van den Heever. The HOPE concept got a lot of flak to start with, she says. "People didn't get it. They saw religious connotations, or thought it sounded like a charity." But the internal debate gave the repositioning team an opportunity to explain the concept further to staff, and once the funding and positive attention started coming, most of them were convinced of the merit of the whole project.

"Everyone needs to work towards the same goal. That's the key to success."

Stellenbosch's successful repositioning had three essential elements. First, it had a clear message. For Stellenbosch, this was: "We are open to all, we are relevant, and we are interested in the future". This developed into the second element—a clear plan, without which fundraising would not have been possible. Thirdly, there was strong leadership from the Vice-Chancellor, which was crucial to overcoming internal resistance to change as well as generating external interest.

These three elements formed the engine that propelled the university forward. But in the end, the success also rested on the vision being taken up by everybody at the university, from administrative staff to researchers, says Van den Heever. "Everyone needs to work towards the same goal. That's the key to success."

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WEBSITE: <http://thehopeproject.co.za>



## **STORY 3 - Using ICTs to boost research collaboration and teaching/outreach**

### **REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES FORUM FOR CAPACITY BUILDING IN AGRICULTURE (RUFORUM)**

- Use ICTs to simplify communication in geographically spread-out research networks
- Clearly define in your ICT strategy how different target groups will be reached
- Monitor use of online resources, and feed the information back into ICT strategy

When the African agricultural training and research network RUFORUM was formed about ten years ago, the continent's universities didn't have good ICT systems, and bandwidth and IT skills were scarce.

This has changed over the past decade, and the consortium of 32 universities in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa has capitalised on these developments to build its network and help members share knowledge, practice and disseminate their research more widely.

RUFORUM embarked on a programme of ICT reform in 2008 to make sure the network made use of emerging opportunities in technology and social media software. It's been a learning curve, but the end result shows how modern technology can be used to simplify and effectivise communication in a geographically spread-out research network.

It received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2008 for a programme to harness ICT for the improved performance of its secretariat and network. It started with a benchmarking exercise to find out how ICTs were used throughout the network. The survey showed that RUFORUM members did appreciate the importance of ICTs, and many had ICT policies, ICT units and local area network infrastructure.

The challenge for RUFORUM was to leverage this capacity. The RUFORUM secretariat took the view that enabling information sharing between members was the single most important thing it could accomplish with its ICT drive. In 2009 it launched a new website [www.ruforum.org](http://www.ruforum.org). This information-sharing community aspect of the website was devised to keep the network connected and create a sense of belonging.

The website integrates user-friendly Web 2.0 tools such as twitter, facebook, RSS feeds, blogs, linkedin and youtube. There were challenges associated with getting senior university leaders to appreciate the need for institutional change, and support it. RUFORUM's communications team had to work hard to persuade and create awareness of the benefits of working with ICTs. The network now also funds Web 2.0 training for its grantees.

RUFORUM's goal is to use its website to showcase the achievements of higher education in agriculture in Africa. In September 2013 RUFORUM launched an institutional repository (<http://repository.ruforum.org/>) to collect the research output of the network and to enhance the visibility of African research in the agricultural sciences. All resources in the repository are freely available and can be accessed by researchers, lecturers, students, farmers, policymakers and other stakeholders worldwide. RUFORUM is now planning further innovations on its website, including using the site as a gateway to African commodity exchanges, agricultural journals, relevant donors and African research institutions.



The website is used for training as well. RUFORUM uses learning platforms to document and share best-practice cases for replication. The website hosts a number of publications produced by RUFORUM to specifically address gaps, such as guidance on postgraduate research and proposal writing. The target is that by 2014 all coursework for RUFORUM supported post-graduate programmes will be digitised. In addition, building on its work with network universities on e-learning and open educational resources, RUFORUM is planning an exercise to explore what a massive open online course (MOOC) might look like for one of its courses.

One of the good things of modern ICT tools is that they make monitoring the usage of web-based resources very easy. RUFORUM's communication department monitors the usage of the website using including Google analytics and web server statistic, among other tools. They have seen a growth in monthly web page views from 1,780 in March 2010 to nearly 95,000 by December 2012. The documents directory has over 600,000 page requests to date.

RUFORUM is working on tools that would allow it to classify the types of users that access information on the website, says Nodumo Dhlamini, who heads up the communications department. This includes improved indexing of uploaded information as well as asking contributors to produce materials targeted for different types of stakeholders, such as farmers, policymakers or extension workers.

ICTs and Web 2.0 tools hold a lot of promise for teaching, research and collaboration in Africa, she says. "A membership based network like RUFORUM has the challenge of limited resources for engaging all the members equally. Face to face interactions are expensive. The competitive research grants that we issue are limited."

The new ICT strategy has directly helped RUFORUM work towards its organisational aims and goals. It has ensured a dynamic regional platform for communication within the network. It has created sustainable value for the member universities. And it has grown the total number of subscribers beyond the member universities to include a diversity of stakeholders.

Over the next few years, RUFORUM plans to further develop its brand and position the website as a 'first stop shop' for anyone looking for African generated agricultural educational and research resources. More information will be added to the repository. But the platform must also be monitored and elements of it that are not proving useful need to be decommissioned, says Dhlamini.

A successful ICT strategy needs to include the following, she adds:

- Clear classification of the target audience, or audiences
- Detailed plans for reaching each target group
- Strong information storage and management
- Sufficient technical staff
- The integration of social media

However, another key ingredient of success is allowing the communications team and technical staff the freedom to find creative and modern solutions. RUFORUM's communication team was lucky to be given room to grow and explore by management, she says. "Communications staff need free rein to facilitate creativity in this dynamic era of ICTs and related Web 2.0 tools."

This requires strong, and forward-looking leadership not only in academia, she adds. "In order for the agricultural higher education and research sector to reap the benefits from ICT we require visionary leaders in the universities, agricultural research centers, extension services and governments."

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**SEE:**

*Dirty Hands, Fine Minds: The Story of an Agricultural Research and Training Network in African Universities*, Mary Ann Fitzgerald and Megan Lindow, RUFORUM, 2013, <http://repository.ruforum.org/documents/dirty-hands-fine-minds-story-agricultural-research-and-training-network-african>