It is increasingly recognised that collaboration among individuals as well as organisations benefits health research. It allows complex problems to be confronted and fosters innovation. Collaboration through networks and coalitions is possible at local, regional and global levels.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

1. To explore how innovation in health research is fostered through collaboration among different actors, organisations and individuals.

2. To describe several structures for collaboration in health research including different kinds of networks and coalitions.

3. To introduce a specific type of coalition: the ‘research and learning coalition’

4. To identify the key features of a well-functioning knowledge network
KEY MESSAGES

- There are different types of networks and coalitions that are useful in different settings and situations.
- Research and learning coalitions as well as knowledge networks are oriented toward knowledge production and sharing.
- Key features of successful networks include a clear goal, champions contributing time and energy, a structure that supports management, and well planned communication.

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TOPIC 1: Networks and Coalitions

There are a number of terms and ideas that are used to capture the general idea of collaboration to improve health research. These include:

- **Coalitions and Networks**: created by two or more organisations to achieve a specific goal that may result in increased access to resources, enhanced profile, presence and leverage. These organisations and individuals share a common interest and often focus heavily on information sharing.

- **Alliance**: organisations with similar goals and mandates synchronize their work and at times share resources.

- **Consortium**: an entity created by several organisations together – for the purpose of increased access to resources.

In recent years there has been a great deal of work on defining and describing networks. Here we will present three categories of networks, as defined by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Key Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communities of Practice</strong></td>
<td>Communities of practice tend to be self-organizing, non-hierarchical and informal groups of individuals who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better. Communities of practice have three essential elements: a specific field, area, or discipline; a defined community of participants; and the goal of improving the practice and professional development of this particular group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge Networks</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge networks consist of groups of experts who work together on a common concern, strengthen their collective knowledge base, and develop solutions. Unlike the more casual communities of practice, membership tends to be more formalised, selecting participants by invitation based on their expertise on a particular issue. This type of network often draws upon the membership of several communities of practice, providing a social and technical infrastructure that fosters collaboration and knowledge exchange.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Soft Networks</strong></td>
<td>Soft networks are largely referral systems whereby members list themselves in an electronic directory and provide a list of content areas for which they are willing to be a resource within the network. The primary purpose of these soft networks is to be a catalyst for initial connections and match-making.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Topic 2: Research & Learning Coalitions**

Coalitions provide the opportunity to bridge the ‘know-do’ gap. Researchers and research users can become connected, build relationships and set common priorities through coalitions. The following features are important in building such coalitions:

1. Establishing a shared problem, challenge or **focus** which captures the interest and concern of participants.
2. Being **inclusive** and engaging researchers and research users to work together on the common challenge.
3. Fostering **team work** and sense of mutual purpose through team projects such as proposals, publications.
4. Creatively using **appropriate communication methods** to engage members.
5. Creating a culture of learning through **intentional learning systems**.
6. Providing skilled **leadership and facilitation** to help guide the coalition.

**Injury Control Centre Uganda (ICC-U)**

In confronting the issue of road traffic injury and trauma, a mechanism was established to engage the multiple stakeholders. These stakeholders included researchers, planners from the police traffic division, members of the Uganda Road Safety Council, and policy makers from the Ministry of Health. This coalition of stakeholders has organised pedestrian safety campaigns, involving local schools (both teachers and students); conducted a feasibility study on the state of the city’s ambulance services; as well as creating a learning centre for post-graduate students as well as hospital personnel.

The ICC-U provides a good example of a “research and learning coalition”. There is a specific focus (injury control). Both research producers and users are included in research and action coalitions. National policy has been influenced – injury prevention and management is now included as a high priority in Uganda’s new 5-year health strategy. Intentional learning is included in the range of activities. And the Uganda team has demonstrated leadership in the creation of a regional injury control network.

*Adapted from LAMP Module: Team and Coalition Building*

**Exercise 1**

Identify a coalition in which you are a member or have worked with in the past. Using the features listed above, answer the following questions:

1. What is the shared focus or problem? How did this shared interest arise or develop?
2. Is the coalition inclusive? How does it foster engagement and working together? What methods does it use?
3. How does the coalition promote team work?
4. What methods of communication does the coalition you identified use?
5. How does the coalition promote intentional learning within the coalition? What methods are used?
6. What type of leadership is used? How does leadership support the coalition?
**TOPIC 3: Health Knowledge Networks**

Innovation in health research is the result of interaction between many actors including companies, universities and research institutes. Individual organisations rarely possess all the knowledge necessary for the whole process of innovation. Combining scientific, experiential and tacit knowledge from different sources fosters innovation. Knowledge networks enable this. Knowledge networks are those networks which aim to produce and disseminate knowledge; knowledge which is both theory-based and problem based. These networks may be formal or informal.

"Almost any collaborative activity involving the sharing of information between human beings can be considered a knowledge network. Such networks can arise spontaneously and almost instantaneously in response to a particular short-term need, or be created for long-term use through a process of planned development, using rule-based formality and heavy-duty infrastructure. Some knowledge networks can involve millions of people, while others can be very small: a family can be considered a knowledge network, for example."

Work by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CHSRF) outline a number of key features of a well-functioning knowledge network. These include:

- A clear goal and set of objectives agreed to by all members and which create a sense of ownership in members for the process and outcomes of the network;
- Champions who are able to devote time and energy into the network and take on a leadership role in moving the knowledge network forward;
- A secretariat or governance structure which is able to support the work of members, foster engagement, as well as remain flexible to the needs of the network;
- Strong communication methods with the purpose of engaging members and facilitating knowledge production and sharing. These methods need to be selected based on their appropriateness for the network and may include websites, newsletters, periodic reports, online learning forums.

**EXERCISE 2**

Using the features of success listed above, identify and assess a network you are connected with. Does the network fulfil the characteristics of a well performing network?

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ILLUSTRATIVE STORIES FROM AFRICA

There are a number of existing networks in Africa – they work on a range of topics and engage many different stakeholders. A few of these networks include:

EQUINET
EQUINET, the Regional Network on Equity in Health in 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.

EQUINET publishes a series of discussion papers, policy briefs as well as research reports covering a wide range of issues in health equity in Southern Africa. In addition to publications, the network supports and fosters country engagement in issues of health equity. Most recently, the network has been involved in country consultations in Malawi and Zambia on health equity.

Website: http://www.equinetafrica.org/

AMANET
African Malaria Network Trust is a network of malaria researchers in Africa. It’s mission is to promote capacity strengthening performance and impact of Africa malaria R&D and training Institutions. AMANET provides grants for capacity strengthening and research site development as well as clinical trials. One of their principal gaols is to promote cooperation and collaboration with stakeholders as well as to promote networking among research and training institutions.

Website: http://www.amanet-trust.org/index.html

INCLEN Africa
International Clinical Epidemiology Network in Africa is a network of clinical epidemiologists that focuses on training and capacity building in health research.

Website: http://www.inclen-africa.org/

INDEPTH Network
INDEPTH is a network of sentinel demographic surveillance sites aiming to inform health priorities and policies based on longitudinal evidence.

Website: http://www.indepth-network.net/

A Network of Networks
African Health Research Forum

With the goal of promoting health research for development in Africa and strengthening the African voice in setting and implementing the global health research agenda, the AfHRF actively connects health research networks working across Africa.

This network of networks enables better knowledge sharing as well as common priority setting among a diverse group of researchers and research users in Africa.

Visit: www.afhrf.org
LEARNING MODULE MINI-ASSIGNMENT

Based on your work in Exercises 1 & 2, consider how best to improve or strengthen the work of the coalition and network you identified.

- Which areas do they currently face weakness?
- What strategies might successfully address such weaknesses?
- Are there coalitions and networks in Africa that you know of which have used these strategies?
Annotated Readings


- This report summarizes a qualitative study of IDRC-supported research networks. The focus is on interactive research and capacity-development networks, as distinct from networks primarily concerned with information exchange. An overall conclusion is that successful networks are “learning organizations”.


- This policy brief:
  - describes the key features of a well-functioning system of innovation
  - describes the main contributions of the innovation system approach to policymaking on scientific, technological and innovation issues
  - discusses the application of the innovation system approach to developing countries
  - raises issues that need to be considered by decision makers and policy analysts seeking to use the innovation systems approach in their work in developing countries

Tools and Resources

Learning Modules

1. Collaborative Training Program Module


- This module within the Collaborative Training Program series introduces the concept of “knowledge networks” within the context of health research for development; it describes features of knowledge networks for health; and it provides tools to assess knowledge networks.

2. Leadership and Management Program Module

This module, part of a series on Leadership and Management in international research, focuses on the importance of team building and coalition building. The module discusses how people and organizations work together – and can learn to do so more effectively.

3. Network Notes


- This is a series of notes on the topic of networks – detailing different types of networks, their functions, purpose and methods. There are two notes: “What is all this talk about networks?” and “Knowledge Networks”

Assessment Tools

4. Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment


- This paper published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development outlines key elements to assess in knowledge networks. These include:
  - **Effectiveness:** Are the network’s goals and objectives clear and are they being achieved; is the network fully realizing the advantages of working together? Is the knowledge being produced relevant to the needs of decision-makers?
  - **Structure and governance:** How is the network organized and how is it taking decisions on its work? Are structural and governance issues impeding its effectiveness?
  - **Efficiency:** Are the transactional costs of collaboration a significant barrier to success? Is capacity being built across the network to strengthen members’ ability to collaborate on research and communications?
  - **Resources and sustainability:** Does the network have the required resources to operate?
  - **Life-Cycle:** How is the network performing in comparison to other networks at similar stages in development: what is the continuum of growth of the network?
What did you think of the module?

Evaluation and Feedback

Please send us your comments on this module as well as suggestions and ideas.

Comments can be sent to:

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