Benefits and Limitations of Thematic Network Projects

Dutch researchers have recently analysed the experiences of a European Thematic Network on Air Pollution and Health (AIRNET). A major limitation of this type of project is the difficulty of encouraging greater participation from non-scientific parties. Overall, the authors conclude that communication is a key factor and should be considered as the joint responsibility of all the parties involved.

Thematic Network projects are increasingly viewed as promising mechanisms for improving the link between science and policy. The main goal of these networks is to enhance the dissemination of knowledge through multi-disciplinary networking within a certain topic area. The stakeholders involved range from scientists and researchers to industry representatives, NGOs and decision-makers working at various policy levels. The European Commission has supported 49 Thematic Network projects within the 6th Framework Programme. In spite of the potential role that these networks can play in strengthening the science-policy interface, the literature identifying principles and guidelines for planning and implementing such network projects is very limited.

Dutch researchers recently analyzed the experience of the EC Directorate General Research funded Thematic Network on Air Pollution and Health (AIRNET), which was implemented from 2002 to 2004. Based on feedback from project reviewers, comments made by participants at workgroup meetings and conferences organised within the project, as well as observations of the network coordinators, the authors describe how the project evolved, and determine the project’s benefits and achievements and its limitations.

AIRNET succeeded in developing a network that kept the level of interest and expertise together with forums for regular meetings. The project benefits and achievements included the following:

- Optimising scientific networking and co-ordination. AIRNET demonstrated that a network is effective at centralising research results from individual projects, as well as at allowing smaller projects to disseminate their results to a wider audience.
- Bringing together different parties and stimulating co-operation. AIRNET demonstrated that a closer co-operation between different stakeholders can contribute to a more efficient management of uncertainties. Nevertheless, experience also shows that inviting stakeholders to conferences and meetings was not sufficient for involving all the different parties together. One of the main reasons for this was the highly scientific content of some of the working group meetings. In order to meet the needs of the end users, AIRNET developed a science-policy communication model known as “AIR-NET work days”, which were organised in different European cities and allowed air pollution and health issues specific to the various regions to be discussed and also attracted policy makers working at regional and local level.
- Facilitating transfer and dissemination of knowledge. An online database was developed with the aim of alerting non-specialists of new scientific research findings that may have important implications for policy development. Such a database provides summaries specifically written for non-specialists. Furthermore, the involvement of communication professionals was essential in improving the readability of the working group reports and conference programmes.

One of the major limitations of the Network was the difficulty of encouraging greater participation from non-scientist stakeholders. This was for different reasons. First, AIRNET was exclusively funded by the EC Research Directorate. A network funded across directorates may have been more effective at establishing and sustaining relationships between different groups of professionals. Furthermore, there is a lack of available experience for organising multi-stakeholders’ network projects at European level. Experiences and lessons learned should be well documented and made available. Another limiting factor relates to expertise within the network itself. AIRNET did not have expertise in technological or urban planning solutions and so it had relatively little to offer to several end-users in these areas.

Despite the limitations of this type of network, they have proven they can contribute to increasing interaction between the different parties. Based on its experience, AIRNET recommends formal structures to continue the development of the networks generated during the project’s lifetime.

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