AfriComNet

The African Network for Strategic
Communication in Health and Development

Going to

SCALE

with Local Knowledge:

A look at how AfriComNet shapes, shares
and sustains communication knowledge
across sub-Saharan Africa

FOREWORD

This report is the result of a research project more than two years in the making. The original seed for the project was planted during a social and behavior change communication (SBCC) workshop held in Nairobi in December 2011. The workshop was a collaboration between the African Network for Strategic Communication in Health and Development (AfriComNet), Ohio University and the Communication for Change (C-Change) project.[1] Inspired by the workshop, three colleagues, each of us from Ohio University's Communication and Development program, recognized the opportunity for ongoing collaboration, learning and sharing. In early 2012, we formed the Community Research Alliance.[2] One of the key objectives of the Alliance is to identify and share promising practices in communication for development (C4D). The documentation and analysis of AfriComNet's work and vision was our first field research collaboration.

This report is based on the results of online surveys, interviews by phone and in Kampala, Uganda, with AfriComNet members and staff, and a thorough review and analysis of AfriComNet documentation (website, strategic plan, curricula, reports, etc.). Over the course of this research and analysis process, we have observed that AfriComNet is not simply a professional network for health communicators; it is a living, breathing and growing knowledge system. Since its inception in 2001, AfriComNet has evolved into an entity that generates, aggregates, shares, and manages knowledge about health communication strategy, theory and practice. The Network makes available practical health communication tools and resources -- training courses, guidance documents, award-winning materials, and face-to-face networking opportunities -- tailored for African health communicators by African health communicators.

AfriComNet also serves as a bridge between a broad range of stakeholders and projects that for more than a decade have supported the production and dissemination of health communication curricula, materials and tools. We perceive AfriComNet as a triple bridge, chronological, geographical and communicational. It spans: 1) projects and funding sources over time;[3] 2) countries, institutions and talented professionals across the African continent; and 3) and range of mechanism for communicating, sharing and learning (in person encounters, mass media and virtual platforms/networks). In our view, this act of bridging captures the power of collective wisdom rooted in decades of on-the-ground experience.

How AfriComNet's approach is designed to invite, refine and widely disseminate the contributions from its members and build a self-sustaining knowledge system to improve communication practices for better health outcomes is what we have set out to document in this report. We would greatly enjoy any comments, suggestions and/or questions you may have.

Karen Greiner, Ph.D., Claudia Nieto, Cynthia Hannah
Co-founders, Community Research Alliance (COMREAL)
www.comreal.org

[1] The C-Change project (2007-2013) was implemented by FHI-360 and strategic partners with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). See: http://www.usaid.gov/.

[2] Community Research Alliance (COMREAL), website: www.comreal.org.

[3] Major financial and technical supports have included the ROADS project and Health Communication Partnership (HCP) implemented by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Centre for Communication Programs and the aforementioned C-Change project (see footnote 1), each funded by USAID.

AfriComNet

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Communication in Health and Development

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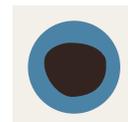
INTRODUCTION

Communication has been employed around the globe in efforts to prevent disease and improve health.

Developing an understanding of what works and what does not work in the pursuit of improving public health through behavior and social change communication is an ongoing priority to the members of the African Network for Strategic Communication in Health and Development (AfriComNet). Founded in 2001 to fill gaps that existed in the health communication field in eastern, central and southern Africa, AfriComNet uses various platforms, tools, and activities to generate, aggregate and share knowledge among individuals, associations, government agencies, academic institutions and community and faith based organizations working to improve public health and human development. The result is a comprehensive, member-led system that provides the vital functions of advocating for theory- and evidence-based health communication practices, synthesizing lessoned learned from the successes and failures of health communication efforts across contexts, and facilitating the growth of a university-based health communication training network.

In the pages that follow, individual elements of the AfriComNet approach are presented, followed by a discussion of how these individual parts work together to shape, share and sustain context-specific health communication knowledge and resources.

Photo courtesy of the Initiative to End Child Malnutrition,
http://www.massgeneralcenterforglobalhealth.org/programs-initiatives/initiative-to-end-child-malnutrition/

LOOKING BACK

Filling gaps in the field

AfriComNet was created in 2001 as the Regional HIV and AIDS Behavior Change Communication Network (BCC Network). Housed at the Regional Center for Quality Health Care in Uganda and with seed funding from the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, the network was established to promote high-quality strategic communication processes and interventions focused on HIV/AIDS prevention.

According to AfriComNet board Chairman, Peter Mwargo, the nature of communication in the region at the time of AfriComNet's inception was oriented more toward journalism than social and behavior change communication. Communication's role was perceived by many as minor and was not used strategically in the broad range of HIV/AIDS interventions being implemented in the late 1990's. The significant volume of initiatives targeting HIV/AIDS during this time produced a need for a mechanism to share knowledge gained from one effort to the next and to prevent recreating the wheel with each new intervention.

Another gap needing to be filled was the ability to share not just from project to project over time, but also across geographic, national, cultural, disciplinary divides. Without a platform for sharing across countries, health communication practitioners remained isolated in knowledge pockets, distinct and separate from one another across the continent.

In response to these challenges, the early years of AfriComNet were devoted to creating collaboration channels amongst professional working in the area of HIV/AIDS. In its earliest years, the network sparked the interest of medical personnel, academics, health communicators, associations, governmental and non-governmental organisations, community-and faith-based organizations and educational institutions.

In 2005, the BCC Network conducted a needs assessment among its membership. At that time, the Network was comprised of 500 members from 35 countries. The findings revealed that a significant number of the membership were seeking health communication training that was accessible, available, of high quality and affordable.

Detail from a exercise to map out the AfriComNet's evolution since it's inception in 2001. (December, 2012)

[4] Phone interview, December 14, 2012.
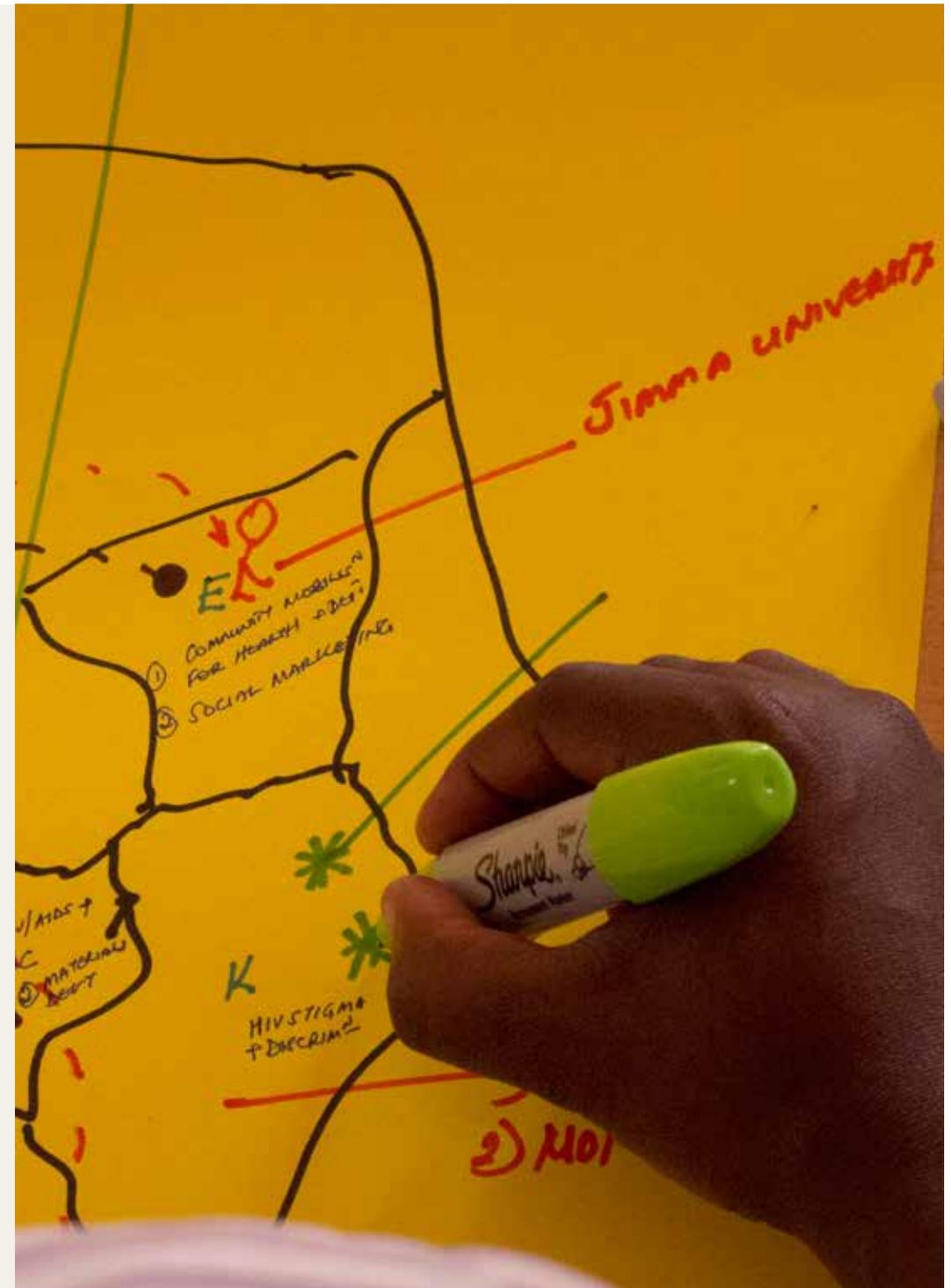
This understanding motivated the organization to re-think its approach to capacity strengthening. Why continue to rely on expertise from abroad when resources could be found within? The BCC Network became the more broadly named and aimed AfriComNet to respond to this question by setting out to design health communication training processes and products specifically based on local assets, needs and perspectives. The 2005 needs assessment helped shape the vision and mission of AfriComNet, as shared in their 2006-2001 strategic plan:[5]

- The Vision: People in Africa making informed choices and taking action to improve their wellbeing.
- The Mission: strengthen capacity in, and commitment to, strategic communication for health and development in Africa.

The result of this move to broaden the scope of AfriComNet's activities was the 2005 birth of the Universities Program, a collaborative partnership between AfriComNet and African universities. Together with AfriComNet, these universities and institutions have contributed to the development, testing and offering of ten courses related to strategic communication for health and development. Many of these courses have been adapted by partner institutions to account for local context and learning levels, and several have been included in official University curricula.[6]

In the years since the 2005 member-based assessment, additional activities and resources developed as part of the AfriComNet approach and platform include:

- A series of Universities Meetings to plan, design and discuss collaborative curriculum development with partners;
- An Annual Awards selection process and ceremony, to recognize and show case high

quality and innovative health communication interventions across a range of categories (interpersonal communication, mass media, folk media, print campaigns, etc.);

- Professional learning Practicums, hosted by different partner organizations each year (or every two years), for health communication practitioners and academics to exchange ideas and share experiences on strategic topics decided upon at the Universities Meetings.

Today, the Network functions as an evolving system that enables its members to create, test, share and store useful tools and instructional materials that can be used by communication for social change practitioners in Africa and across the globe. The approach of complementing face-to-face meetings and Practicum with digital storage and sharing through the AfriComNet website and newsletter ensures that knowledge generated and relationships formed can be sustained and built upon.

AfriComNet's latest strategic plan sets out a new vision for the network to be: "a globally recognized alliance of health and development communication practitioners across Africa advancing the science and practice of strategic communication to improve lives."[7]

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[5] Strategic Plan 2006-2011 for African Network for Strategic Communication in Health and Development (AfriComNet), June 2006, p. 5.

[6] Institutions successful in incorporating AfriComNet supported content are the University of Makerere Uganda and the University of Namibia.

[7] AfriComNet Strategic Plan 2013-2018, p. 3 (AfriComNet), June 2006.

Today, the Network functions as an evolving system that enables its members to create, test, share and store useful tools and instructional materials that can be used by communication for social change practitioners in Africa and across the globe.

AfriComNet
AT A GLANCE

The Universities Programme

Is a network of African universities and training institutions providing training, research, and programming in strategic communication for health and development

Jimma University, Ethiopia

Makerere University, Uganda

Mildmay, Uganda

Moi University, Kenya

University of Nairobi, Kenya

University of Zambia

University of Namibia

Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Annual Awards for Excellence

Recognize innovative and exceptional use of strategic communication as a tool for health and development

Practicums

Bring stakeholders together to increase understanding of social and behaviour change communication, share best practices, and develop new resources

2001	2005	2005	2006	2007	2007	2008	2008	2011	2013	2014
Founding of the network as the Regional HIV and AIDS Behavior Change Communication Network (BCC Network) in Nairobi	Communication Capacity Needs Assessment is conducted among BCC Network membership and training institutions in the region	Vision for Universities Programme and Centers of Excellence is born	First organizational Strategic Plan (2006-2011) is developed. Name changes to African Network for Strategic Communication in Health and Development (AfriComNet)	AfriComNet signs MOUs with new University partners to develop short in-service communication related courses	Annual Awards for Excellence launched in Johannesburg to recognize and promote innovative and effective health communication inititatives	Inaugural Practicum (a new forum for knowledge sharing) held in Addis Ababa	First course on HIV/AIDS and Strategic Communication is developed and pretested through Makerere University and Mildmay Center	Content from courses incorporated into communication curricula at Makerere University & Diploma in HIV management at University of Namibia	2013-18 Strategic Plan developed. Registration status changed to International NGO in Uganda	Practicum on Monitoring and Evaluation of Health Communication programs scheduled to take place in Ghana

AfriComNet at a glance

KEY COMPONENTS

Universities Program

The Universities Program is a collaborative partnership between AfriComNet and African universities and training institutions in East, Central and Southern Africa to develop and offer courses in aspects of strategic communication for health and development.

Since its establishment in October 2001, AfriComNet has supported the development of 10 courses, each of which has been tested, revised and made accessible to Network members. The saying "all of us are smarter than any of us," illustrates why AfriComNet

Central campus of University Partner, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

invests in collective capacity. Professors from multiple African universities will out-perform one professor developing and testing a course alone. AfriComNet invests in an intensive and rigorous testing and revision process for course materials, and it funds travel between partner Universities so that faculty can support and coach one another as existing courses are rolled out in new locations.

In some instances, courses developed by one partner University are adapted for length, focus and cultural context by other Network member institutions. This process is exemplified by the current adaptation of the Social and Behavior Change Communication course for Peer Educators in Tanzania and Rwanda. The course is being designed to be supplemented with examples and case studies tailored to each country and will then be translated into local languages. Once translated, each version of the course will be pre-tested in each country and revised as necessary. AfriComNet course materials are stored virtually and are made available to Network members and practitioners. The portability and quality of these courses have led to members using, sharing, adapting and blending them with other material.

This knowledge creation and sharing effort has been underway for more than 10 years and has led to the development of the following courses:

1. HIV/AIDS Stigma and Discrimination
2. Social Marketing for Health and Development
3. Basics of HIV/AIDS and Strategic Communication
4. Strategic Communication for Health and Development
5. Community Mobilization for Health and Development
6. Understanding and Using Demographic and Health surveys
7. Monitoring and Evaluating Strategic Health Communication Programs
8. Applied Skills in HIV/AIDS Counseling and Interpersonal Communication
9. Development and Testing of Social and Behavior Change Communication materials
10. Social and Behavior Change Communication for Peer Educators

With course materials stored online and available free of charge, new universities and training institutions can connect with AfriComNet's knowledge sharing platform, leading to an increased capacity return on the initial financial and human investment.

Learn more at www.africomnet.org

Annual Awards

The Annual Award for excellence in HIV and AIDS communication in Africa is a vehicle for both advocating for and sharing effective, high-quality strategic communication for health. Created in 2007, the Annual Award for Excellence in HIV and AIDS Communication in Africa recognizes individuals and organizations that innovate, strengthen, and popularize strategic HIV/AIDS communication. Applicants submit in a range of categories including mass media, multichannel, interpersonal, community, social marketing, popular, folk, series, and social/new media interventions, campaigns or productions.

The main purpose of the awards' process is to recognize and make visible the efforts and progress made using strategic communication related to HIV/AIDS by African organizations and producers. The annual AfriComNet Awards attracts practitioners, strategists and media producers to the Network and creates and opportunity for members, applicants and submission reviewers to learn from one another. Facilitators and alumni of AfriComNet's training courses serve as jury members. Winners are selected based on relevance, methodology, innovation, impact, and ease of replication in other contexts. After each Award cycle, the work of winners is shared public on the website with the intention of recognizing excellence and inspiring the adaptation of award-winning communication interventions in new contexts.

Communication tools

A range of communication tools allow AfriComNet members to access and share health communication-related information.

The website is the primary platform for sharing and storing information. It contains:

- Downloads: Allowing members to access all course materials developed through the Universities Program.
- Resources: A website section with information on Award Winners, links to external websites and communication-related toolkits and guides, which ensure the accessibility of tools and resources beyond the life-cycle of a given project or program.
- Information on events, new courses, Practicum-related presentations and resources.

An additional communication tool is the Newsletter, which gives members access to curated information, and the listserv, which enables members to hear from, and communicate with, a much wider range of health communication professionals than individual email.

Practicums

Partner institutions in Uganda, South Africa, Tanzania and Ethiopia have hosted learning Practicums for health communication and development practitioners and academics to discuss strategic themes, which change yearly. A blend of theory and practice, these practical seminars are mechanisms to share experiences and co-create accessible resources for professionals.

AfriComNet network members collaboratively chose the main theme for each year's practicum based on trending topics on strategic health communication. Based on the suggestions, the secretariat drafts a call for abstracts for practicum content and determines the profile of a keynote speaker to open the meeting. Issues such as Community-based Communication for comprehensive HIV prevention, HIV Prevention communication among married and cohabiting couples, Family planning Communication and Advocacy responses, and Communication perspectives on HIV/AIDS, Alcohol and Gender based violence have been discussed since 2007 and a set of recommendations for practitioners have emerged from each of the themes.

More than 90 experts from 10 different countries in Africa participated in the 2012 meeting held in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), demonstrating a growing interest in specialized training across the continent. Participants of the 2012 practicum produced "Key recommendations for improving the effectiveness and scale-up of community based and interpersonal communication."

Recommendations included:
1. scale up positive deviance approach,[8]
2. use social media for social change,
3. develop guidelines to support evidence-based communication interventions, and
4. evaluate interpersonal and community based communication approaches.

The 2014 Practicum in Accra, Ghana (June 2-4), will focus on Monitoring and Evaluation of Health Communication programs. This practicum in Ghana signals an important extension in AfriComNet programming, reaching West Africa, and a whole new set of practioners and academics, for the first time.

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[8] For more on positive deviance, visit the website of the Positive Deviance Initiative: http://www.positivedeviance.org/.

AFRICOMNET

Members' reflections on the Network

Peter Mwarogo
Chairman, AfriComNet Board of Directors

"We conceived our courses as opportunities to model practice through collaboration. Course participants are invited to comment on the modules and make suggestions about ways in which both content and method could better serve their interests. They are seen not just as receivers but also as managers who are supposed to use and replicate the acquired knowledge in their own organizations."

Brenda Kyeyune, Course Alumnae

"One of the main purposes of the Network is to model the incorporation of strategic perspectives in development processes. When you work with decision makers with different backgrounds, you know that it takes time to understand the implication of communication as a process. Therefore it 's been very important to me to learn how to advocate for my field through Africomnet's trainings."

Amos Zukusooka,
AfriComNet Facilitator

"Course facilitators are usually practitioners, not academics, and I think this is because there is an important value in a facilitator who can understand the implications of theory in the field. I'm sure we can make a difference in Africa if we can help people to learn from their own experience and interests."

Emmanuelle
AfriComNet Course Alumni, Zimbabwe

"The strategic communication process leads to better campaigns which produce better results and a positive influence on public health. [In the future}, I would like to see in-country forums which allow AfriComNet course graduates to interact, providing a way to bring what we have learned to life."

800
PEOPLE TRAINED
since 2007

10
institutions of HIGHER LEARNING collaborating across
6
COUNTRIES

1600
MEMBERS
in a growing Network

Are you an AfriComNet member?

AfriComNet invites you to share your thoughts about AfriComNet and its impact on your work.

Contact AfriComNet at infodesk@africomnet.org for more information.

Claudia Nieto
Doctoral Student,
Ohio University, U.S.A.

"In a class on HIV/AIDS in Africa at my university, I used short excerpts from AfriComNet Annual Award winning media (Intersexions and the S.A.F. E. documentary) to illustrate the wide range of media and narratives being employed to address the challenge of HIV/AIDS related behavior and social change. For most of my classmates, this was by far the most interesting aspect of my presentation."

OVERVIEW OF APPROACH

AfriComNet is building infrastructure for shaping, sharing, and sustaining the flow of health communication knowlege across Africa. AfriComNet's collaborative processes bridge time and place to make effective health communication strategies, processes and tools widely accessible.

SHAPE

Collect, aggregate and refine the health communication knowledge that exists in the field to maximize the potential of untapped collective know-how

SHARE

Create the means for stakeholders invested in the effective and accessible health communication to share knowledge, experiences and tools

SUSTAIN

Stored knowledge and in-person gatherings equip members to use communication to positively impact public health

Set the agenda

AfriComNet members and partners institutions provide input on AfriComNet activites and help set the agenda for strategic health communication for health and development in Africa

Develop courses

Input from health communication implementors is shared with University partners who use their expertise and experience to develop health communication training courses

Disseminate courses + materials

Valuable knowledge is offered to those involved in frontline efforts to use communication to improve health on the African continent

Recognize and advocate

The AfriComNet Annual Awards event recognizes and makes visible the efforts and progress made in the health communicationsector using strategic communication. Recognition and visibility foster the extension and sustainability of promising practices

Create forums for growth

AfriComNet's Practicums provide opportuntites for identifying trending topics in health communications, sharing experiences and transfering knowledge

Maintain a knowledge system

AfriComNet's infrastructure serves as a vital resource broadening access to effective health communication knowledge and tools

SHAPE

AfriComNet's comprehensive approach to strengthening health communication capacity has at its foundation a belief that the knowledge, expertise and experience required to fulfill the shortage of skilled health and development communication practitioners across Africa an best be addressed by those living and working in these contexts.

Context matters

The understanding that people make health decisions within intricate, dynamic and non-linear social systems, or what is often referred to in academic literature as 'complex adaptive systems,' [8] means health communication interventions must be driven by local contexts and adapted for different languages and literacy levels. For AfriComNet, this means African health challenges are best addressed from a local point of view. Health communication practitioners routinely engaged with the people health communication efforts are intended to support and have valuable experiential knowledge that can be applied to the specificities and particularities of health promotion and human development on a contextual basis. While there are not monolithic or uniform "African problems," there is regional expertise and experience for regional health and development challenges. AfriComNet's membership and its broad range of stakeholders are particularly sensitive to local context making them a strategic asset in efforts to develop health communication knowledge and tools that address public health challenges in Africa.

Power of the collective

The idea that the best solutions can be generated through collective problem-solving is not new. 'Crowdsourcing,' and 'solution leveraging,' while not perfectly synonymous, are two 21st Century terms for solving challenges through collaboration, an approach exemplified by AfriComNet. Each of the Network's key components -- the Practicum, Annual Awards, the AfriComNet.org website and the Universities' Program -- serve as foundational infrastructure for collaboration among actors that had previously addressed local health communication challenges in relative isolation. AfriComNet allows regional actors to pool their expertise and experiences to employ their collective health communication wisdom.

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[8] For an insightful discussion of the role of complex adaptive systems in development, see Exploring the science of complexity ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts (2008) Overseas Development Institute.

SHARE

AfriComNet allows valuable health communication knowledge and tools to be put into the hands of people involved in frontline efforts to improve public health on the African continent through communication.

Connecting minds

AfriComNet has multiple mechanisms in place for connecting talented individuals and institutions, and 'growing the vines' that make up the network's knowledge sharing system. Perhaps most central to this effort is AfriComNet's vision for the Universities Program. A collaborative partnership between AfriComNet and African universities and training institutions in East, Central and Southern Africa, the Universities Program helps underwrite the costs associated with developing, testing, adapting and sharing courses on communication for health and development.

Other means by which AfriComNet is 'growing the vines" of its knowledge system is by providing opportunities for health communicators and others with an interest in strengthening health communication capacity on the continent to meet face-to-face. The Annual Awards program, Practica, and Universities Meetings and course development workshops serve as forums for exchanging ideas, sharing experiences and developing knowledge which complement the AfriComNet virtual network, and other virtual platforms, providing resources to health and development communication professionals.[9]

Moving beyond knowledge silos

AfriComNet synthesizes knowledge, perspectives and experiences across contexts and makes the end products accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Through this process AfriComNet contributes to the dismantling of 'knowledge silos.' The classic knowledge silo is characterized by an inward focus and vertical communication. Information silos usually exist because 1) there are no perceived benefits or incentives for people to share; 2) there are no established forums where sharing can happen; and/or 3) information that is shared isn't shared in a format that is understandable or meaningful to others.[10] AfriComNet's knowledge sharing system and its efforts to build a community for the health communication field is moving Eastern, Central and Southern Africa's local and regional knowledge and collectively generated solutions beyond national, disciplinary and institutional boundaries.
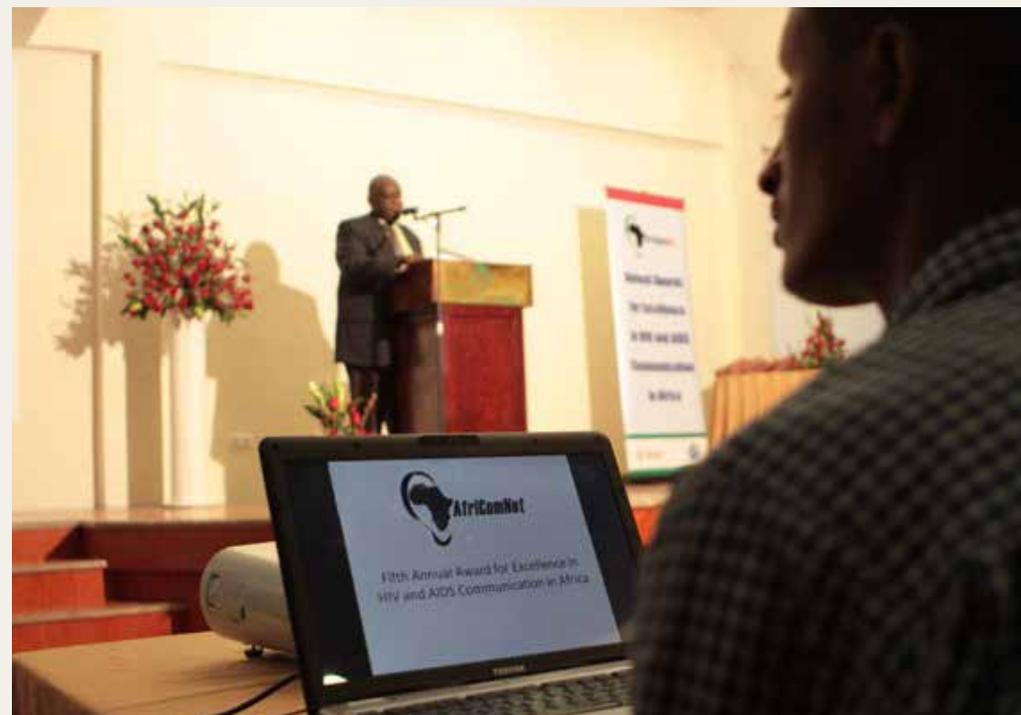
Participant and speaker, 6th Annual Awards for Excellence in HIV/AIDS Communication in Africa, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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[9] An excellent resource is the Communication Initiative – www.comminit.com. A newer resource (January 2014), is the Health Communication Market Place: http://www.healthcommarketplace.org/

[10] Knowledge Management in Public Health (2009) Liebowitz, Schieber, Andreadi (Eds), CRC Press, p. 88

SUSTAIN

"AfriComNet has more than 10 years of experience pursuing its original mission to "strengthen capacity in, and commitment to, strategic communication for health and development in Africa."[11]

AfriComNet's various mechanisms for creating, sharing and storing knowledge and experience are sustained through the contributions of members by paying careful attention to *how* the Network operates across various platforms with multiple actors. The section below describes how AfriComNet's efforts to build relationships, institutionalize knowledge and adapt/re-purpose resources have strengthened and sustained the Network over time.

Building relationships

One of AfriComNet's strengths is the holistic nature of the network. It is supported by a virtual platform, through the website and the wide range of resources available, but it thrives because of the real-world, in-person experiences and relationships that are created and maintained through activities like the Universities Meetings, Courses, Practica and Annual Awards.

AfriComNet's on-the-ground activities, and the relationships they foster, constitute what anthropologist Gregory Bateson would call a "difference which makes a difference."[12] The in-person activities allow AfriComNet to have a more in-depth, personal focus, that can help strengthen commitment to and sustain the network in ways that are not possible for virtual-only networks. The important "in-person" difference notwithstanding, AfriComNet is joined and complemented by a range of existing communication-related websites and networks, most notably the long-established and resource-rich Communication Initiative Network, which has international reach and breadth beyond health.[13] For health communication practitioners and scholars alike, there is great value in participating in virtual and on-the-ground networks.

Institutionalizing knowledge

Several partner universities have successfully lobbied their institutions to embed courses they developed with AfriComNet support within existing undergraduate and graduate curricula. Makerere University (Uganda), the University of Namibia and the University of Zambia each currently offer courses supported originally by AfriComNet, and in some cases, combine materials developed by several member institutions.

Catherine Nengomasha, AfriComNet member and lecturer at the University of Namibia, provided an example of how institutionalization of course material occurred at her institution:

"We developed a new two-year diploma course in HIV counseling and Management. We incorporated modules on Stigma and Discrimination (developed by University of Nairobi), Research and Monitoring and Evaluation (University of Namibia) and Strategic Communication for HIV/AIDS (Makerere University / Mildmay, Uganda)."[14]

The University of Namibia account illustrates how the investment in course development can provide sustainable returns by pooling resources from many AfriComNet partners and institutionalizing those resources within established higher education curricula. In addition to the increased return on investment, the institutionalization process contributes to the sustainability of the Network by creating a particular kind of participation and sense of ownership as each university develops a course or adapts one to its specific needs. The fact that several African universities have now included AfriComNet content in their official curricula means that the same initial donor investment will yield sustained returns with generations of students.

"Re-purposing" resources

AfriComNet produces new resources, and then stores and disseminates these resources through the collective capacity model as described above. To its great credit, AfriComNet also technically and financially supports the adaption of existing resources to "re-purpose" them when needed. With over ten years of sustained activity, the Network has developed, delivered and improved multiple health communication courses over an extended period of time. When needed, the Network has adapted and/or combined course content for new audiences, and new contexts. This kind of longevity has allowed AfriComNet to continue getting "course material" returns on course development investments made years previously.

For example, a Strategic Communication course developed by Makerere University in Uganda, also tested and used at the University of Zambia, is now being adapted to create a low-literacy, local language version for "frontline" health workers in Rwanda. For donors who support AfriComNet activities and materials, the longevity and resourcefulness of the Network ensure that investments made during one funding cycle will be sustained, improved and/or adapted over time.

[11] Strategic Plan 2006-2011, p. 5.

[12] Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 318.

[13] http://www.comminit.com

[14] Phone interview, March 16, 2013.

LOOKING FORWARD

As AfriComNet moves into its second decade of resource and collaboration strengthening on the African Continent, new opportunities await.

In this final section, we look forward to the future and present three opportunities, the first two were recently identified by AfriComNet and incorporated into the 2013-2018 strategic plan.

Opportunity 1: Support and nurture national chapters [15]

Significant "added value" stems from AfriComNet's on-the-ground activities and adaptation of health communication content for local context. The development of national-level chapters would strengthen the shaping, sharing and sustaining powers of the network. Local chapters would allow members to increase "periphery-to-core" contributions, which could range from innovative adaptations of existing AfriComNet content to invitations to regionally curated and sponsored knowledge sharing events. Reducing barriers to chapter formation through simple, easy-to-follow procedures, and then invitations to multiple forms of participation and contribution, will be crucial to chapter-level growth of the network. AfriComNet can provide the seeds of structure and encouragement. It will be up to local and regional practitioners and academics to water the seeds with their own initiative, effort and vision.

Opportunity 2: Make dynamic learning possible online [16]

Improvements in infrastructure and technological capacity in some African countries make it now possible for AfriComNet to offer learning opportunities virtually. Decisions will need to be made about the best mechanism for online learning; whether to use "synchronous" (live webinars or streaming sessions), "asynchronous" (video and/or self-paced discussion board-based learning), or a combination of e-learning approaches. The funding for content and platform development, and the payment mechanisms for online courses are likely to pose a challenge to AfriComNet as they get started with web-based learning. AfriComNet can build upon past and current collaboration with projects and institutions with experience offering courses online, such as the C-Change project and Ohio University, as it makes the transition to dynamic virtual learning.

Inviting members to submit stories of use, with photos, lessons learned, and mistakes made (why not?), can be part of a culture of growing and learning at AfriComNet.

Opportunity 3: Research and document promising practices and "stories of use"

Network members Makerere University and the University of Namibia have been able to incorporate the AfriComNet short courses into their mainstream university curricula. How these institutions managed to advocate for and succeed in institutionalization of the courses within the university system is a research question waiting to be answered.

The benefits of adapting AfriComNet content for new contexts, local languages and literacy levels present another arena worthy of inquiry and documentation. To encourage this kind of adaptation, AfriComNet could create a mechanism for Network members to share how they use, or have used, AfriComNet content. Collecting these "stories of use" could be as simple as an online invitation and a downloadable, easy-to use template. There are insightful online examples available to guide AfriComNet in how to "pull" in and make visible rich, member-generated stories. Open Ideo, the Human Centered Design Community (HCD Connect) and the "It gets better" project are three examples (among many) of easy-to-share mechanisms that come to mind.[17] Inviting members to submit stories of use, with photos, lessons learned, and mistakes made (why not?), can be part of a culture of growing and learning at AfriComNet. Valuable health communication wisdom and experience exists - in remote villages, urban University classrooms, radio and film production studios and active minds across the continent. AfriComNet can help get it into circulation by facilitiating the sharing of "stories of use."

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[15] National chapters are included in AfriComNet's Strategic Objective 3: Strengthen capacity and recognition of AfriComNet as a leader in strategic communication, Strategic Plan 2013-2018, p. 14.

[16] E-learning is one activity supporting AfriComNet's Strategic Objective 1: Promote effective strategic communication practices for health and development, Strategic Plan 2013-2018, p. 14.

[17] See http://www.openideo.com/; http://www.hcdconnect.org/; and http://www.itgetsbetter.org/

Lessons learned
what went well
(and what did not!)

First-person narratives
member experiences in their own words

Visual documentation
seeing is believing
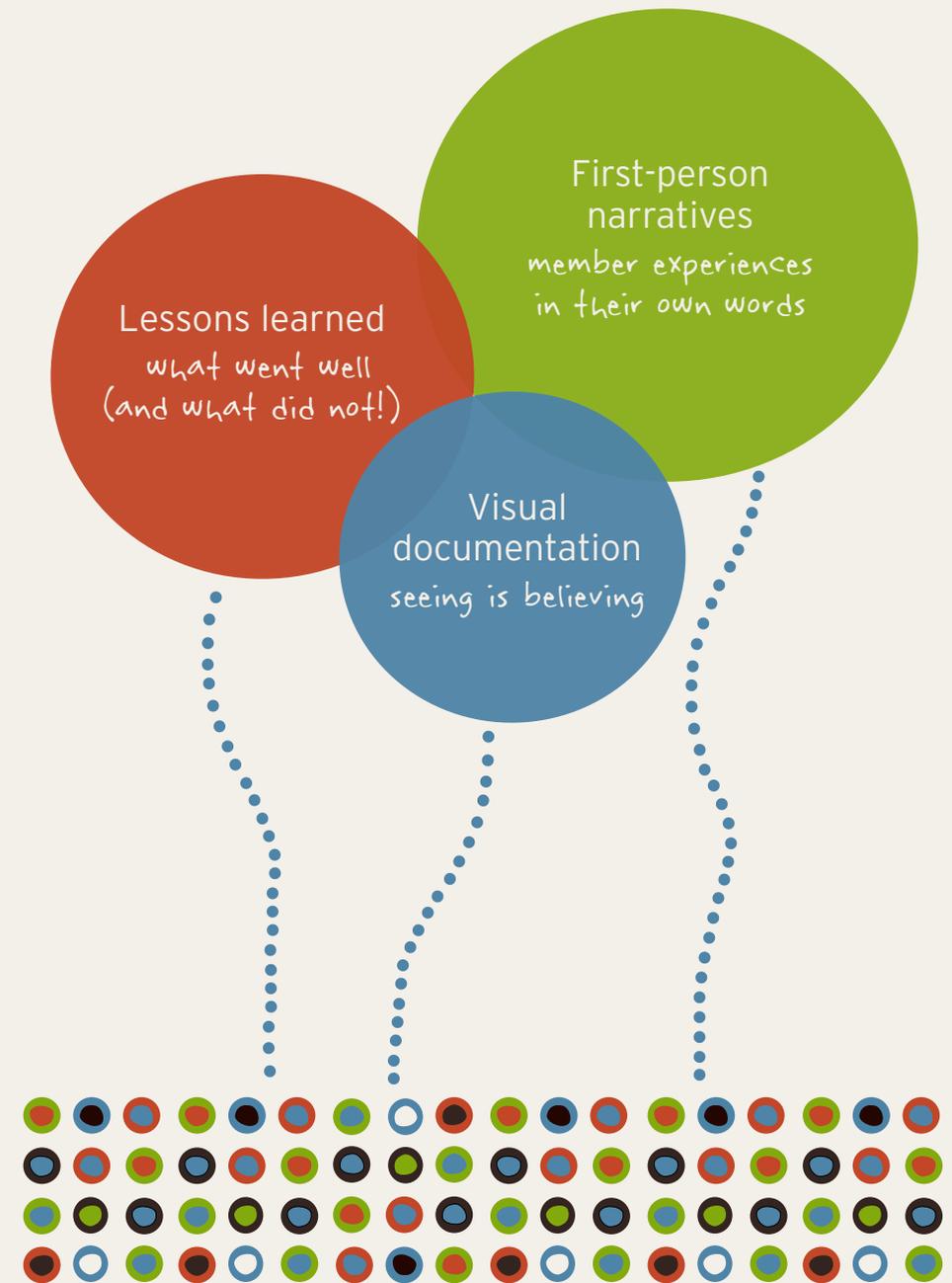
stories of use

I have established multiple relationships with AfriComNet members in different countries to strengthen my professional career; and even received a CARTA scholarship to pursue a PhD in Health Communication due to the connections and work I have done through the Network.

MARJORIE'S STORY

Member profile - Kampala, Uganda

Marjorie Kyomuhendo is passionate about communication, a sentiment supported by a lifetime commitment to efforts to use communication to improve lives and drive social change.

In 2005, Marjorie joined AfriComNet to meet other communication professionals and expand her health communication knowledge. Nearly a decade later, Marjorie's investment in the Network has provided her with a range of valuable experiences including service as an AfriComNet curriculum developer, course facilitator and Annual Awards program judge. For Marjorie, lots of 'doing' over the years has led her to believe in the potential of health communication to make a difference that matters in people's lives.

Today, Marjorie is a key member of a Makerere University-based team working in partnership with AfriComNet to institutionalize strategic and development communication at the University's Department of Journalism and Communication. In 2013, Marjorie saw the university graduate the first cohort of undergraduate communication students whose core curriculum was influenced by the collective work of AfriComNet Universities Programme partners. According to Marjorie, the collaborative nature of AfriComNet provides Marjorie and her team at Makerere University with "a rich way to work across geographic divides."

On a more personal level, the Makerere-AfriComNet partnership has inspired a methodological shift in Marjorie's teaching style. Her work in the University's classrooms has moved from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one by incorporating tools and strategies employed by the AfriComNet Universities programme namely; case studies, applied learning, group work, practical sessions and student presentations. Together, the revised core curriculum and teaching methods allow Marjorie to prepare her students with the knowledge and skills required to contribute to efforts that use communication for social and behavior change.

And what does Marjorie's wish for AfriComNet in the future? The growth of member AfriComNet communities at the local level and expanded documentation of what the Network is doing and how it is doing it.

IN CONCLUSION

AfriComNet's challenge and opportunity for the decade to come is to continue to create, strengthen, and, ideally, increase the events, resources and sharing platforms that make knowledge exchange among members possible. It will take the energy and efforts of a wide-range of AfriComNet members to both consolidate what already exists, and also extend the Network in ways that allow for new activities, geographies and platforms. Inviting, and making possible, the contributions of members, existing and new, will be critical next steps for this dual consolidation and extension.

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JHU.CCP
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Mildmay/Uganda
University of Namibia

Join the Network!

Learn more about how to become an AfriComNet member
www.africomnet.org/home/join-the-network.html

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AfriComNet

The African Network for Strategic
Communication in Health and Development

Going to Scale with Local Knowledge
A look at how AfriComNet shapes, shares
and sustains communication knowledge
across sub-Saharan Africa

Community Research Alliance
comreal.org