

Truly listening

Share-Net International, the knowledge platform for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), unites individuals from different countries and backgrounds to make better policies. It proves to be a good foundation for equality, say the coordinators from Colombia, Burkina Faso and the Netherlands. 'Every voice deserves to be heard, including those of young people and women in rural areas.'

Text: Joris Tielens

'Lack of access to safe abortion means that many girls and young women undergo illegal and unsafe abortions. Many of these women die as a result, in Burkina Faso.'

It is one of the first things Zalissa Bandé mentions when asked about the SRHR issues in her country. Lack of adequate sex education and access to information, especially in rural areas, are also important, she says.

'Politically, there has been a change in that area,' she explains. 'Many laws in favour of SRHR have been introduced, but unfortunately many of them have not been implemented. For example, there is a law that allows safe abortion, but in practice women do not have access to it.'

Yet Burkina Faso is progressive in other areas: contraceptives have been available for free to everyone in public hospitals since 2019.

Carolina Peña from Colombia also cites safe abortion as a top priority when it comes to improving sexual and reproductive health and rights, in addition to combating sexual violence and promoting the rights of the LGBTI community.

Bandé and Peña are the coordinators of the Share-Net International (SNI) hubs in their respective countries—the international knowledge platform on SRHR, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It is organised as a network of hubs, hosted by existing NGOs in the various countries. The staff is not employed by SNI, but by those local organisations. The secretariat of Share-Net International is located in the Netherlands and is part of the SRHR team of KIT Royal Tropical Institute.

Bandé works at SOS Jeunesse et Défis, an NGO in Burkina Faso, and Peña works at the Colombian NGO Profamilia. There are also hubs in Bangladesh, Burundi, Ethiopia and Jordan.

In recent months, Bandé and Peña have set up a brand new hub—a national network of SNI—in their country. 'We exchanged many experiences with hubs in other countries,' says Bandé, 'to learn how to do things correctly.' The same goes for Peña. She now has a team of five women in action, and organisations are already joining the network.

The objective of SNI is to link research to policy and practice, so that the research is used to improve SRHR programmes, says Dorine Thomissen, the coordinator of Share-Net International in Amsterdam.

'This requires exchange between researchers and policy makers, but also with the people whose sexual and reproductive health and rights are at stake. Every voice deserves to be heard, including those of young people or women in rural areas.'

Exchange takes place in different ways at SNI, such as around specific themes in so-called communities of practice, about infertility, menstruation or the health of LGBTI people. Organisations from different countries work together in these communities.

It is also stimulated by the *Share-Net International Rapid Improvement Model*, a learning method developed with partners where people from other countries come together to solve a concrete problem in the field—and later evaluate it together.

For the hubs in Bangladesh and Jordan it was about preventing child marriages and for the one in Burundi about teenage pregnancies. The participants created a knowledge product that makes reliable information available in an accessible way, such as through an informative video or animation, a website or campaign.

Knowledge exchange can generate new ideas, says Carolina Peña: 'Menstrual health was not a big issue in Colombia until the corona pandemic came along. Because of the economic consequences, it became more difficult for people to buy sanitary pads here.'

'We had no experience with this, but in African countries—where the problem has existed for longer—they do. Because we are part of Share-Net International, we were able to learn from them about ways of tackling the problem.'

Zalissa Bandé says she learned a lot from the exchange between the countries. 'Not only about SRHR, but also about how to set up cooperation and raise funds.' A major innovation is that much more is done online, since the pandemic, says Bandé.

'Digitalisation has gone really fast in Burkina Faso and also enables us to have more contact with organisations abroad. We have many new activities on new topics, all online. SNI is seen as an innovative platform here and it gets a lot of interest.'

'They speak different languages and come from different cultures, you have to take that into account'

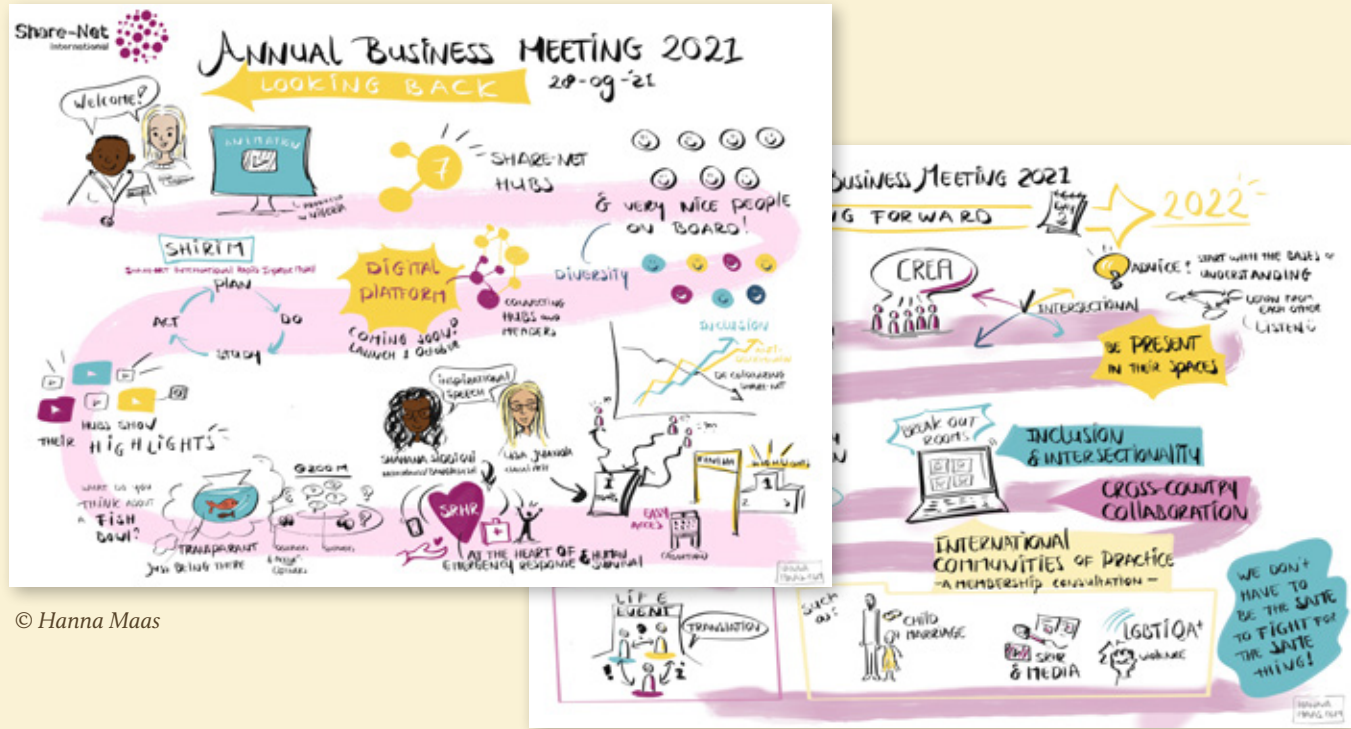
Equality is ingrained in Share-Net's structure, more so than in organisations working with local implementers, says Thomissen: 'We are a global partnership, a network of organisations from different countries. That offers opportunities for equal cooperation.'

This brings out the strengths of all the partners, Thomissen says. 'The fact that there are free contraceptives for everyone in Burkina Faso and that there is such strong female leadership in Colombia is something we in the Netherlands can learn from.'

Carolina Peña confirms that equal cooperation between the network members is also important within the countries. The hub in Colombia brings many together, such as youth-led organisations and civil society organisations, but also researchers from universities or policy makers from Ministries, NGOs and other platforms on SRHR.

'You might think,' says Peña, 'that a Ministry has more say than a youth organisation, but with us they have an equal voice.' Youth input must be significant, she believes. 'We don't want them to implement our agenda, we really want to know what they want and need and support them to achieve their goals. To do that, you have to truly listen to the other person.'





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Combining insights with co-creation

For information or campaigns on SRHR to be effective, they must not only be based on proven approaches, but also be compatible with the local context and practice.

Truly practical and useful knowledge products combine insights from researchers with those of policy makers and various people in the field. This happens in the co-creation conferences of Share-Net International.

These are three-day working conferences that are held every two years. Activists meet researchers, civil society and policymakers there.

The first edition took place in 2019 and focused, among other things, on infertility—until then an underexposed topic on the SRHR agenda. One of the results was a video showing experiences of infertility in different countries and raising awareness about it.

The video shows that it is not only a medical issue, but also a social and economic one. Moreover, it is also an issue of gender equality, mental well-being and human rights.

In the project, representatives from diverse backgrounds from Bangladesh, Jordan, Burundi and England worked together. Some worked on making IVF affordable,

while others dealt with policy issues or raising awareness.

The video is one of many knowledge products that have emerged from the co-creation conferences, such as reports, blogs, films, articles or training materials, says Maria Codina. She is from Spain, but has been working as a country coordinator and knowledge management expert at SNI in Amsterdam for several years.

'The conference aims to produce concrete ideas for new knowledge products that can fill a gap in research, policy or practice,' she says. 'Afterwards, there is a grant round of ten thousand euros each for participants to shape the product.'

Topics for the conferences are selected in a careful process that starts with the hub that hosts them—and next year that will be Colombia. The hub there suggests a few issues that are relevant there and all SNI members can vote on them.

For the actual conference, groups of about six participants are assembled to work on the development of concrete products. It is a mix of young and old, with diverse backgrounds and from different countries, she says.

'Bringing people together from different countries not only contributes to learning new things, but also makes it easier to share views and approaches that are sensitive in some countries,' says Maria Codina.

'In Colombia, for example, access to safe abortion is a difficult issue, but despite this they are working hard on it. By coming together at the co-creation conference and sharing examples of what works well, others can experience their approach.

'It inspires people in countries where the issue is even more sensitive. The same goes for LGBTI rights; sometimes people have to work under the radar. But there are always ways to make things discussible, even if it seems very difficult.'

The conference is jointly organised by the international secretariat in Amsterdam and hubs in other countries. 'I find the way we work together with the hubs very innovative,' she says.

'They take the lead. We see it as an opportunity to bring people from all over the world together to learn from each other—and all members decide together on the topics to be discussed at the conference.'

When you are striving for equality, it is important to be aware of diversity, says Bandé. 'In our Burkina Faso hub, many different groups and stakeholders work together. They speak different languages and come from different cultures, you have to take that into account.'

Even between North and South—in practice between the SNI secretariat in the Netherlands and the hubs in Africa, Asia and South America—the cooperation is equal, says Thomissen. 'But the fact is that the funding for our work comes from the Netherlands, and that creates a certain power relationship. We try to work together on an equal footing by being open about it.'

In the learning process of new hubs, SNI does this by making an analysis of power dynamics and discussing what can be done to make the work more inclusive and equal. For example, by allocating subsidies together, with less and less being decided in the Netherlands. SNI also chooses to make young people part of the network board and translate everything into all languages.

'To move the complete SRHR agenda forward, we have to keep finding a middle ground together'

'But it would be ideal,' she continues, 'if the funding were to come from multiple donors and governments over time, including from the countries where the hubs are located. That would give them a stronger position.'

The Dutch government can play a role by pleading with other governments for funding for this subject, Thomissen thinks. 'And, yes: an organisation to coordinate this network must meet certain criteria, but it does not necessarily have to be based in the Netherlands.'

Peña believes it would be a good idea if local governments also contributed to the local platforms. 'We have received training on fundraising,' she says, 'and are looking for new donors. If the Colombian government would contribute to our platform, that would be great—also because it would put the topic of SRHR more firmly on the government's agenda.'

Dorine Thomissen welcomes the fact that the Netherlands is a progressive donor in terms of SRHR, with more attention than other donors to controversial themes such as safe abortion and sexual diversity, and sexual education that also covers more controversial topics.

'It is necessary for the Netherlands to continue to support it financially in the future,' she says, 'because otherwise it will easily disappear from the agenda, internationally speaking. We know what the consequences of the Trump administration were for organisa-

tions working on safe abortion. Things stagnated in places where dependence on US funding was high.'

At times there is tension between the Dutch progressiveness and the pursuit of equal cooperation with countries and organisations in the South, she acknowledges. 'That is certainly a challenge.'

Not all members of SNI will pursue a progressive agenda in the same way, with open attention to issues such as sexual diversity. 'We are a knowledge platform and not lobbyists, but we do feed lobbyists with our knowledge exchange. With its donorship, the Netherlands has an agenda to make SRHR as inclusive as possible worldwide.'

At the same time, Thomissen wants to be guided by the needs of members in the network. 'To move the complete SRHR agenda forward, we have to keep finding a middle ground together.'

She believes that the Dutch agenda and the pursuit of equal cooperation can go well together, but that requires careful international cooperation: 'We want to listen to what is needed locally.'

Upon closer inspection, this often turns out to go beyond the familiar conservative agenda. Moreover, the exchange of ideas as organised by Share-Net can set things in motion, she says.

'In Jordan, a report or video on sexual diversity is not going to be made without a fight, but if you then have people from Colombia around the table, it becomes easier to discuss, because it is a very different socio-cultural context, with other restrictions and possibilities and with slightly more options to talk about sexual diversity.

'The more diversity there is, the easier it is to identify and connect with something—and a different approach is inspiring. That is the role of Share-Net.'

Whoever is given the floor will also determine a great deal, Thomissen says: 'For example, women really bring up different themes than men. It is very important that women get and take the lead on this subject.'

It requires, she concludes, true international cooperation, in which everyone's voice—from whatever context—is heard and the debate is facilitated. 'And that, to me, is actually the only correct and justifiable form of international cooperation.' ●

‘Youth must have a say’

Young people should have a say in research, policy and programmes on SNi: making something for young people does not work without involving them. The experiences of two young employees show how SNI goes about it.

‘At Share-Net, I was given the space to ask questions,’ says Victory Nwabu-Ekeoma, ‘to take the initiative and the lead. I am wary of the word “empowerment”, because I have my own strength and it’s not like I need to be empowered by someone else.

‘But it is necessary for an organisation to give you space—and that’s rare for a young black woman. I was very quickly given the confidence to take on a big role on my own and that surprised me and really made me grow.’

Nwabu-Ekeoma, 22, was born in Nigeria and raised in Ireland. She studied Global Health in Maastricht and was an intern at Share-Net Netherlands, where she worked as a communications officer after graduating.

Her personal experience illustrates the way young people participate within SNI. ‘You cannot create something for young people—like a programme or policy—without involving them,’ she says. ‘Young people from different backgrounds need to have their say and be part of the process. As a matter of fact: nothing *about* us, *without* us.’

That alone is not enough, Gaia Zanaboni adds: ‘It has to be meaningful participation. Many companies and organisations use young people as symbols, while in fact young people have no say—that is symbol politics. At Share-Net, we really participate.’

Zanaboni is 21, comes from Italy and studies Global Sustainability. She is currently completing an internship at Share-Net Netherlands and she also feels that she has been seen. ‘I am learning to express myself here and to be who I am, without thinking what adults would think.’

Meaningful participation of young people is part of SNI’s core strategy, says Hannah Kabelka. She works at Share-Net Netherlands as a facilitator of working groups and



Victory Nwabu-Ekeoma

Gaia Zanaboni

Hannah Kabelka

organises a conference. At 29 years of age, she still considers herself to fall into the category of youth.

To make the voices of young people heard, many youth work at the secretariat of SNI—such as Nwabu-Ekeoma and Zanaboni. SNI appointed young people to the board and they are also given a meaningful role at conferences and in exchanging knowledge.

Young people also play a major role in the hubs: the one in Burkina Faso is run entirely by young people and at other hubs, too, young people work in the secretariat and are on the supervisory committee of the hubs.

Kabelka: ‘We want to ensure that all positions in the network are accessible to young people—and that they learn from people with more experience, but also vice versa. At the same time, we want Share-

Net to be a safe haven where they can be themselves and come together. And that they can shape that space themselves.’

Active participation of young people also helps to make the work of SNI more inclusive, Gaia Zanaboni thinks. ‘They bring up the controversial subjects more easily. We are open to change and come up with new ideas.

‘And the youth often have a hopeful message. Activist movements often come from young people, such as Black Lives Matter, Pride or the climate movement. They truly bring change to society.’

However, young people must be given the space to ask critical questions. ‘Early on in my internship,’ says Victory Nwabu-Ekeoma, ‘I asked why more people of colour were not part of the networks. “And the young people of colour?” I asked. It felt comfortable to do, which is rare.’

Linking Research, Policy and Practice

Disseminating knowledge and research findings of students and young researchers on sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality and stimulating discussion on these issues, that is the aim of the conference *Linking Research, Policy and Practice*, the academic conference that SNI organises every autumn.

This year, the conference was held for the tenth time—online and in hybrid sessions—with a specific focus on youth input. The conference was also a truly international event for the first time, whereas previously it had only highlighted work by Dutch students.

Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD students interacted with senior researchers and with policymakers from Ministries and Embassies, as well as with practitioners working for NGOs or youth organisations.

‘We use it to encourage research-based



policies and programmes,’ says Hannah Kabelka, who co-organised the conference. ‘It is an important place to network and meet everyone on a cool, interactive online platform.’

Many collaborations have emerged from previous editions of the conference. One of them led to a publication that summarises the experiences gained during the corona

pandemic with the online provision of comprehensive sex education.

The pandemic prevented traditional classroom meetings from taking place. It turns out that NGOs in Indonesia, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Egypt and Malawi have found all kinds of creative ways and media to reach young people with good information about sexuality despite this.

New digital platform

Share-Net International has launched a new website that works as a social network for professionals in the field of SRHR.

At share-netinternational.org you will find the platform that seamlessly brings together news from all country hubs into a single interactive digital space. People can register as members and then they can access a members-only networking section with a list of members worldwide.

It is a kind of Facebook or LinkedIn-like social network for SRHR professionals. ‘And as far as I know it’s the only digital place of its kind, so it’s pretty unique,’ says Rhian Farnworth, who is a social media specialist at SNI.

Farnworth has worked for commercial companies in digital marketing for the past ten years, but recently completed a Master’s degree in Gender Studies and was happy to

join Share-Net International to promote its online presence.

‘I think the platform will enable much more cross-border collaboration by providing a digital space where Share-Net members can connect and share knowledge with each other, regardless of their location in the world.’

In addition to online sharing and meeting, the new platform offers an extensive SRHR library that is constantly updated, says Farnworth, and brings blogs, news and listings for events and job opportunities.

Members’ security and privacy are taken very seriously, says Farnworth: ‘We check potential members for their identity and ensure they work in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

‘And we offer alias profiles for people who don’t want to reveal their real names and we provide information on digital literacy and how to protect yourself online.’

