Developing a Communications Strategy

Regardless of the objectives of a project, defining a communication strategy shows attention to planning, an understanding of the situation, an ability to carry out the work, and clear identification of the goal.

The ability to communicate is essential to the success of any undertaking and an important factor in the achievement of its objectives. We have entered an age of knowledge, and the key to accessing and harnessing that knowledge lies in the ability to communicate.

When the undertaking is a research project that has achieved good results, it becomes imperative to disseminate those results — otherwise the work will have been in vain. But, how do we communicate those results? How can we convert the data into knowledge? Data that are not shared or are shared with only a few people are not very valuable. A successful communications strategy will enhance the value of your research considerably.

Defining the strategy

Communication does not just happen. It must be organized, developed, and built. The first step in the process is to define a communications strategy.

A good communications strategy allows you to exercise better control over your work and to frame the issues in a perspective other than research. A communications strategy removes doubt, emphasizes planning, and involves all the project participants in raising the visibility of the research.

Defining the communications strategy is a task that is best carried out as a group. In addition to pooling expertise, a group approach has the even more important advantage of building on interactions between the participants. Even a small-scale communications strategy will facilitate your work. After all, a small-scale plan is better than no plan at all and you may be able to develop and perfect it as you go along.

A collective process

There is much to be gained by making the development of the communications strategy a collective process. For a small-scale communications strategy, only part of the research group may be needed, but, when possible, participation of all members of the research team should be enlisted, in addition to one or more communication resource people, if they are available.

The pooling of skills and competencies is essential: although the researchers are familiar with the content of the project, they rarely have the qualifications needed to develop an appropriate communications strategy. This is where an expert in communication can make a valuable contribution.

The strategy can be developed in several stages:

- A preliminary outline is prepared by the research team and close collaborators.
- The outline is submitted to various partners for comments and revisions. These partners can be consulted individually, in groups, or in a brainstorming session that includes anyone you think could make a contribution.
- The team meets to finalize the strategy. The input of a communications expert is highly desirable at this stage.
- Once the strategy has been established, it must be communicated to the partners and groups you want to reach. This will make it easier to integrate them into the process of developing the various tools intended for their use.

Questions to consider

The idea is not to complicate your life. Regardless of your skills in the area of communication, take a simple approach when preparing the communications strategy:

- What research elements need to be made known?
- What are your objectives?
- What groups or partners would be interested in this knowledge?
- What are the needs of these partners? What elements of your knowledge are most interesting to them?
- What communication tools do you want to use for these various target groups?
- What is your timeframe?
- What financial and human resources are available to you?
**Updating the strategy**

Once the communications strategy has been defined and communicated, it must be implemented. The best — although perhaps not the easiest — way to ensure that the strategy is developing according to plan is to hold regular team meetings to get updates on the situation. Are we following our plan? What is left to do? Who does what? What are the deadlines?

These team meetings on communication are a good way to keep everyone up to date on needs and to keep the dossier active.

The suitability of the strategy is also continually verified during meetings in the field, where you have to be able not only to explain the strategy to others, but also to adapt it to local needs. The same applies to the tools.

**Target groups and audiences**

The target audiences are the groups or individuals at the local, national, or international level with whom you are seeking to develop a synergy and to share information. They can be local communities, state agents, funding agencies, or researchers.

Because each target group has specific characteristics and is faced with different problems or situations, a specific communication strategy is needed for each. For example:

- **For the direct beneficiaries and partners in the research**, a strategy is needed to ensure that the research results are perpetuated, that they serve as a model and that their impact in the field is extended.

- **For political decision-makers**, a strategy is needed to ensure that participatory development is better understood, adopted in other projects, and adapted to their needs.

- **For the development community, researchers, stakeholders, and funding agencies**, a strategy must be aimed at gaining visibility in the field, sharing the project results, and developing exchanges on initiatives carried out with the target populations.

The importance of defining your target groups cannot be overstated. Knowledge, beliefs, and customs often vary widely from one group to another and the ways in which knowledge is acquired are not the same in each community. Even within a given target group, it’s important to learn how to segment. For example, within a group of villagers, you may want to reach the leaders and the women in particular, because you believe this is the best way to influence the behaviour of the population as a whole.

No matter what group you are addressing, the aim is always to promote the results of your research and the processes by which you arrived at those results and to make sure that the different target groups are aware of them.

We can divide our target groups into internal “clients” and external “clients.”

**Internal clients**

By internal clients, we mean groups that are directly involved in the fieldwork and, by extension, researchers working on other natural resource management projects with links to IDRC. For example:

- Local communities, who are the direct beneficiaries of the projects.

- The local network of organizations or individuals with whom the project team is working in the field or who are conducting similar work in the region: state agents, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), other research centres, embassy services, etc. You share and exchange information with these individuals or organizations on a regular basis.

- Other IDRC researchers working in natural resource management. As researchers, we should welcome the exchange of information with other researchers working on the same problems. Communication between researchers will create a dynamic that will benefit all partners.

**External clients**

By external clients, we mean groups or individuals with whom the project is not in direct contact during its...
fieldwork, but with whom you would like to share the knowledge acquired.

- At the local, national and regional level, inform decision-makers and other stakeholders about the research results and methods, so that they will understand them and, perhaps, adapt them in the implementation of new development programs or within existing programs.

- At the international level, establish links, inform international researchers and development agencies about the results of your research and the methods used to arrive at those results. Our aim is to promote the exchange of ideas to foster greater cohesion among stakeholders.

An ABC of communication

For communication to occur, there must be

A source of information — In this case, the source of information is you, with all your strengths and weaknesses, your knowledge and skills. It includes your research and the elements that make up that research. And your partners, with whom you exchange information.

One or more objectives — These objectives will vary depending on the target audience.

A message for each target audience — The message is the formulation of an idea. It includes data that have been processed and adapted to make sure they can be understood by your target audiences and it takes into account the information needs of the various groups you wish to reach. What information do you want to transmit? What needs to be known and understood? What behaviours are you researching? Considering these factors will help you compose the message.

Transmission channel — The channel is both the medium that you use to transmit your information and the understanding that you expect to achieve in those who receive the message.

A receiver — The receiver is the destination of your message. The receiver interprets the message according to his or her own perspective, knowledge, and logic. A good message takes this into account. To whom do you want to transmit your information? What groups, people, associations, projects, departments might be interested in the methods and outcomes of your research?

Feedback — Communication is not a one-way process: we send a message to someone and that person reacts to the message received. It is important to test the effect of the message and the communication tool before finalizing it. Then you can make adjustments based on the receiver’s feedback.

Put someone in charge of communication

Each research team should clearly identify someone to be in charge of communication. Within an organization, the director of communication services, who reports to the president or secretary-general, is responsible for overseeing the application of the communication plan and ensuring that everyone carries out their duties according to that plan.

Admittedly, research teams rarely have an internal information service. So, who should be in charge? In view of the crucial importance of communications, this responsibility should go to the person with the best understanding of the project, that is, the principal researcher, or his or her assistant. Alternatively, the project team can choose someone on the team who is at ease with or interested in communications concepts. Although the latter approach may be more difficult to achieve, it can prove to be the best solution. Regardless of the solution, managing the communication component takes time.

Generally, the person assigned to head communications should work in partnership with the actors in the field, such as the person in charge of education or facilitation. They should keep themselves informed of any information-related needs or opportunities.

Although one person should be in charge of the communication component as a whole, someone should also be responsible for each element of the communication plan and for the production of each tool (this can be the same person). For example, the person responsible for the production of a leaflet would see to the content, write the copy or supervise the copywriting, select and oversee the graphic designer, edit the work, and ensure that it is completed on time.

Local languages

Regardless of the tool that you decide to produce, use the language or languages spoken by the groups you intend to reach. Although English may dominate on the Internet, this is not the case in villages!