



Communication in innovation platforms

Innovation does not happen in the dark. Innovation happens when knowledge and ideas from different people are combined to arrive at new solutions. Innovation platforms are like a switchboard that connects different 'light bulbs' (people) together to shed light on bigger issues and stimulate brighter ideas.

Communication is the electricity that powers the platforms. It helps to create a steady flow of information to and from different parts of a platform. It regulates power flows, avoids overloads and black-outs on the innovation network, and connects to other parts of the network. Communication is a crucial part of facilitating the process of innovation within an innovation platform (Brief 10).

Communication combines different 'energy sources' to power the platform at different phases of its development. The goal is not just to produce or disseminate more information, but rather to use communication processes to power changes identified by the platform.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

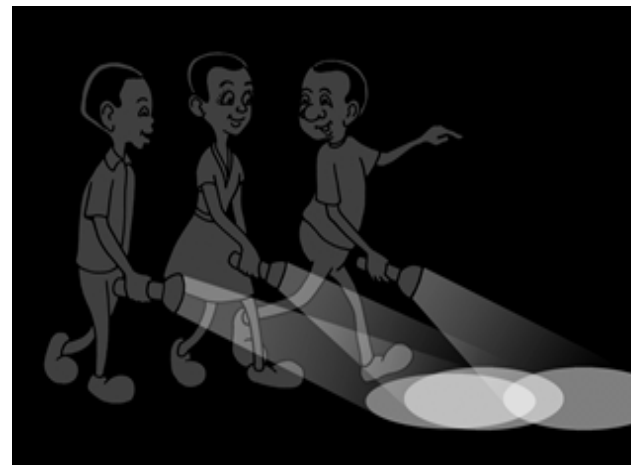
Communication comprises a broad range of practices and approaches which include information management, publishing, use of information and communication technologies, communication for development, knowledge sharing and knowledge management.

Communication among platform members.

At the outset, communication helps bring platform members together to identify common objectives. It helps manage information and ensure an institutional memory. It ensures that all members' voices are heard and gives them ownership of the platform's work. It clarifies everyone's agenda and the vision of change that brings them together.



Communication helps align platform members



Communication with outsiders. Communication also links the platform and its members to people and organizations outside. It does this by engaging with other networks, providing information and making linkages to relevant groups. It also helps disseminate information for people to act on it.

Three roles of communication

Communication serves three major purposes in powering innovation platforms:

- Engagement and dialogue
- Documentation and outreach
- Learning

Engagement and dialogue

Communication among platform members happens everywhere: at platform meetings, between meetings, online, on the radio, and face to face. Creating a common understanding and tapping into the views of different members is necessary for a platform to deliver its goals. Communication is about making sure these conversations happen, frequently enough, and well enough. Effective and trusted facilitation is essential.

- Example: The International Livestock Research Institute brought people together in roundtables to discuss fodder in Ethiopia. The meetings were short, stimulating, focused on a particular theme, and focused on actions and policy change. Held twice a year, they were more effective than longer, more frequent meetings (<http://fodderadoption.wordpress.com/tag/fap>).

Tools for engagement and dialogue

- Facilitated meetings and events
- Study tours and exchanges
- Role plays and games
- Networking

Documentation and outreach

Activities, learning and events need to be documented. Why? To build an institutional memory for the platform members, and so outsiders can understand what the platform achieved and how it did so.

Researchers often see innovation platforms primarily as a way to disseminate their research findings. This should be avoided. Information disseminated through the platform should meet the demands of the participants.

- Example: In Ethiopia, the Nile Basin Development Challenge (Case 1) uses web-based tools such as wikis (nilebdc.wikispaces.com) to support collaboration, Yammer (www.yammer.com) to stimulate internal conversations, and blogs (<http://nilebdc.org/>) to communicate with outsiders. Locally, it spreads information via a newsletter and minutes of meetings.

Tools for documentation and outreach

- Internet and web-based tools
- Documents, newsletters and publications
- Video and photographs
- Resource centres
- Radio, phone, text messages, media

Case 1: Communication in the Nile

The Nile Basin Development Challenge in Ethiopia illustrates how a range of communication tools contribute to its goals.

The project supports local innovation platforms at three locations, as well as a policy-oriented national platform on land and water management. The local platforms bring together people living in and working with a particular local community. Communication efforts include documenting and explaining local issues using participatory video, capturing community perspectives using photos and photo-films, facilitating engagement and learning using games, facilitating regular stakeholder discussions of opportunities and challenges, documenting insights and lessons by project staff using regular team meetings, compilation of most significant change stories, wiki collaboration tools, and sharing stories and updates on the internet for wider audiences.

The national platform's communication efforts include position and issue papers, regular platform meetings on different topics, meeting reports and recommendations for wider audiences, groups working on specific issues, online publishing and dissemination of messages.

More: <http://nilebdc.org/>

Learning

In innovation platforms, learning breeds innovation and sharpens the capacity to innovate over time. Communication brings people together to learn individually and as a group, and to present what they have discovered to others. Innovative communication methods can break through cultural barriers or overcome status differences by getting people to play non-traditional roles.

- Example: The NBDC tested games and role-playing. It used a 'Happy Strategies' game where participants find ways to manage water, control erosion and grow food in a particular landscape (<http://nilebdc.org/tag/game>). This game is based on a detailed technical evidence base, translated into a format that development workers and others can use to assess interventions. The game allows researchers, farmers and community members to understand and discuss different strategies in a more open way.

Enabling and disabling factors

Various factors can help or hinder communication within the innovation platform.

Power and representation (Brief 4). Power relations between people and organizations in the platform can bias the discussions and decisions made because some voices are heard, while others are not. They can muddle conversations, impair relationships and destroy trust between members.

Capacity (Briefs 8 and 10). Effective communication requires a wide range of skills: in interpersonal communication, facilitating processes and events, website management, radio and video production, publishing, design and public awareness. Platforms are more likely to thrive if they are supported by strong communications and have strong interpersonal communication among all members (Case 2).

Resources. Time and money available have major impact on the approaches and tools that can be used. They affect the size of the communication team, the intensity of efforts to bring people together, and the communication tools used. Access to electricity and the internet has a big effect on the choice of communication approaches; knowledge of local languages can also be critical.

Tools for learning

- Participatory video
- Story telling
- After action reviews
- Learning games
- Journals
- Most significant change stories

Culture. Local norms, values and preferences can have a strong influence on the quality of communication. Innovation platforms are likely to communicate better if the members are curious, open-minded, tolerant of risk and failure, generous and inclined towards critical thinking. In such groups, communication will be a powerful tool to help the innovation platform achieve its goals.

Case 2: Communication in RiPPLE

RiPPLE, a project focusing on water supply and sanitation in Ethiopia, invested heavily in increasing the capacity of local champions. It spent a lot of time on daily informal communications to provide information to and assist the local planners.

The program provided training to platform members on various methods of process documentation, including photo stories, most significant change stories, short videos and films, outcome journals and mapping, and case studies. A resource centre was established to give people access to research products, newsletters, films and books related to water and sanitation.

More: www.rippleethiopia.org

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Innovation platforms are widely used in agricultural research to connect different stakeholders to achieve common goals. This is one of a series of briefs to help guide the design and implementation of innovation platforms. A contribution to the CGIAR Humid-tropics research program, the development of the briefs was led by the International Livestock Research Institute; the briefs draw on experiences of the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food, several CGIAR centres and partner organizations.

Credits

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Other briefs in this series

- 1 What are innovation platforms?
- 2 Innovation platforms to shape national policy
- 3 Research and innovation platforms
- 4 Power dynamics and representation in innovation platforms
- 5 Monitoring innovation platforms
- 6 Innovation platforms for agricultural value chain development
- 7 Communication in innovation platforms
- 8 Developing innovation capacity through innovation platforms
- 9 Linking action at different levels through innovation platforms
- 10 Facilitating innovation platforms
- 11 Innovation platforms to support natural resource management
- 12 Impact of innovation platforms



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