

Communicating inside out – The NBDC's first year

As in the other basins, the Nile Basin Development Challenge comprises several linked projects – each with different leads, participants, partners and outcome logics. The N5 'coordination' project aims to help team members act as "one single project team, delivering promised and emerging outputs as required and using technical, institutional and advocacy strategies to bring about change in the way research, development and policy actors work in the basin." For the N4 project, this is described as "using project management tools and implementing projects in timely manner and interacting more effectively for higher Nile BDC outcomes and goals."

Getting good communication among the various actors and partners is essential for the whole program to operate, and to have impact.



To serve these needs, we started our communication activities 'inside' the Challenge. In the past year, we have started to change the ways that our research knowledge is captured, shared and communicated. We are also changing the knowledge sharing behavior of project staff – by encouraging and supporting them to adopt a wider, richer – and ultimately more effective and impactful - set of tools and approaches to project interaction, documentation, reflection, and learning.

The first priority – and our most significant progress - has been 'inside' the Challenge. We are also using knowledge products, face to face meetings and extended communication approaches to communicate ongoing activities to wider audiences, nationally and beyond. The idea is to create the audience and demand for the science that we will ultimately produce. An important spillover to the 'outside' is in the area of communication where several changes in approach (or decisions) are directly linked to our activities.

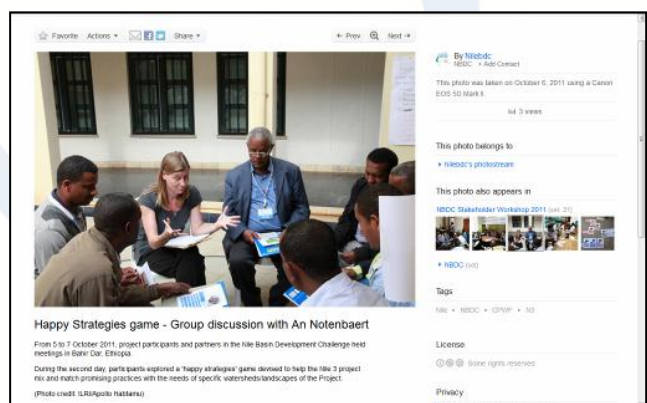
Five promising changes

Project and event planning and reporting – We use an open wiki accessible to all project staff (and visible to others – <http://nilebdc.wikispaces.com>), to share plans and information needed to coordinate the Challenge. All events are planned and reported on the wiki. Most project staff received basic wiki support and training. The wiki now has 55 members with edit rights; people shared 200 files, and between July 2010 and December 2011 it had 50000 views.

To facilitate interaction among project actors spread across different locations and institutions, we set up a yammer network in 2010. So far the 62 members shared some 850 updates with colleagues. The significant changes are the adoption of new tools by most staff and the gradual willingness to share on these platforms (instead of in private email conversations). For the project, we have a richer knowledge base; and all staff can contribute/become aware of project activities.

Documenting discussions and events – The discussions and decisions along the project history are also important (even when findings are not yet ready). We use the wiki and website, as well as video and photos to record and capture significant activities in the project. We archive reports, presentations, etc. in an open repository (<http://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/2296>).

The start of participatory video work in the project offers exciting opportunities for communities to create and capture and share their knowledge. The significant changes are that we capture and make public a greater proportion of what a typical project produces, we document processes openly and quickly, and we seek to tell the process story as well as sharing the findings.



Using different meeting formats – Workshops, events, and meetings are important parts of the Challenge, and we want them to be a good use of time. We give much attention to the design and facilitation of our larger events – to maximize participation, encourage cross-project engagement, and generally involve participants. It is now ‘normal’ for events to be designed with multiple contributions and using participatory processes and sessions. For the May 2011 workshop, we introduced ‘hard seat’ interviews instead of formal presentations (<http://nilebdc.org/tag/hard-seat>); in the October 2011 meeting, we devised a ‘game’ format to mobilize experiences of the participants. We use video and photos to capture reports and give a flavor of the meetings and we aim to report almost ‘live’ from events using our wiki, website and other social media.

The significant changes are the commitment of event managers to try different formats, to avoid one-way communication, and to report and share online.



Publishing open products – Since the start of the project, we have published as many finished and intermediate products of the projects as possible on the Internet, in full, using an open license, and in open platforms. These include DSpace for reports, flickr for photos, slideshare for presentations and posters, and blip for video (see <http://nilebdc.org/comms-tools>). The significant change is that such a large proportion of the projects’ products are already open and accessible.

Spillovers to other organizations – One of the most interesting changes has been the take up of these approaches by others. Our DSpace repository has evolved to include a repository for the CPWF; the Google Calendar is being used by CPWF and the Mekong Challenge; The CPWF has a lively Yammer

network; our presentations are combined in a shared online CPWF ‘slideshare’ account. We also use the NBDC ‘model’ as a demonstration/discussion base for other ILRI projects and have shared it with national partners from Kenya and Ethiopia.

Whose behavior is being changed?

So far the changes are most visible in some project staff. All have been exposed, and we see gradual acceptance of the different approaches. There is still a long way to go for us to achieve 100% adoption. The most important change is perhaps the recognition that ‘different communication is possible’ - and can have benefits.

As mentioned above, we see changes in other parts of the CPWF and the CGIAR. Other parts of ILRI are also adopting elements of the ‘Nile’ approach – usually unconsciously. A different, more dynamic, model of research communication is emerging.

Where the least changes?

At the level of communities and farmers where we count on other partners and the emerging innovation platforms, for instance, to be the main communication carriers and spaces for interaction, learning and on the ground impact.

How significant the changes?

So far, this is difficult to judge and assess. Several individuals have become keen adopters. We are able to generate more ‘raw material’ on the various project activities that we can use to build communication products and stories. Photos, presentations and reports have all become accessible to project staff without barriers; smaller activities that would normally remain invisible are reported and shared. Project coordination and event preparation is more transparent and participatory, with minimum email traffic, and outputs shared in accessible ways.

The main challenge is to make ‘open sharing’ the default ‘setting’ for all project staff – many people are not used to documenting and sharing what they do and learn on a regular basis on open spaces.

This brief is based on a ‘most significant change’ story prepared for the CPWF in late 2011.

The Nile Basin Development Challenge (NBDC) is funded by the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF). It aims to improve the resilience of rural livelihoods in the Ethiopian highlands through a landscape approach to rainwater management. It comprises five linked projects examining: 1) Learning from the past; 2) developing integrated rainwater management strategies; 3) targeting and scaling out of rainwater management innovations; 4) assessing and anticipating the consequences of innovation in rainwater management systems; and 5) catalyzing platforms for learning, communication and coordination across the projects.

The NBDC is implemented by a consortium comprising the International Livestock Research Institute, International Water Management Institute, World Agroforestry Centre, Overseas Development Institute, Nile Basin Initiative, Stockholm Environment Institute, Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute, Catholic Relief Services – Ethiopia, Oromia Regional Research Institute, Amhara Agricultural Research Institute, Bahir Dar University, Ambo University, Nekemte University, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Water and Energy.

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