14 Lessons for out-scaling and up-scaling from *Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice*

Background

The synthesis document 'Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice' identified lessons from the UK Department for International Development's Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS) which could improve the way that projects communicate in order to ensure 'better research outcomes'. And, from this document, it is possible to draw some lessons that are relevant to, and useful for, communication strategies intended to promote out-scaling and up-scaling.

Key points

- Tackle communication strategically.
- Make sure that the team includes communication professionals.
- Communication takes lots of work, time and money.
- Persistent face-to-face communication gets results.
- Tap into existing channels of communication.
- Use appropriate ways of communicating and finding information, including the internet.

Lessons learned

Tackle communication strategically. The RNRRS programmes and projects did pay attention to communication[43], and they did communicate in many different ways and develop and use many communication products. However, few addressed communication strategically or went through the process of developing a real communications strategy, which must involve the following:

- Analysing the situation,
- Identifying communication challenges, stakeholders and target groups,
- Setting objectives,
- Planning and scheduling activities,
- Establishing baselines,
- Setting up an evaluation process and
- Budgeting for human and financial resources.

All of this is important, because communication processes and products to out-scale and up-scale research results are more likely to be effective if communication is tackled strategically (Box 14.1).

Box 14.1

Tackle communication strategically
"The mandatory communication plan is useful in that it forces one to think about institutional linkages and the actors and institutions one has to address to bring about change. …we have had to address institutional issues, and focus on communicating our results in forms that address institutional issues, and can be understood by those in relevant institutions at the interface with communities and policy communication."[44]

This means identifying the key people and groups in the out-scaling and up-scaling process and listening to them, and then learning from them and responding appropriately. Communication 'products' may be needed to support the communication process (Box 14.2). Analyse what is needed, then develop and test materials thoroughly beforehand and evaluate how effective they were afterwards.

Box 14.2

The communication process is as important, if not more important, than products
"Policy papers were important, but the presence of project members at regional meetings and their lobbying efforts were critical activities to ensuring that the issues were placed on the [CARICOM] agenda."[45]

Call in communication professionals. Researchers will not have the communication expertise to develop and implement effective communication strategies (and products) for out-scaling and up-scaling research results. Just as researchers will be needed to do what they do best (i.e. explore technical issues) people with expertise in relevant fields of communication (with farmers, policy makers etc.) will be needed to interpret and communicate the results of research. Teams leading the initiatives will need to be made up of people with a mix of skills designed specifically for the project concerned.

Communication takes lots of work, time and money. Few programmes and projects commit sufficient resources to communication. In the RNRRS, most underestimated the amount of

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43 P3 Box 1 Norrish, P. 2006. 'Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice'.
44 P4 Box 4 Norrish, P. 2006. 'Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice'.

45 P3 Box 1 Norrish, P. 2006. 'Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice'.

time, effort, money, expertise and degree of flexibility that they needed to communicate effectively.

Persistent face-to-face communication gets results (Box 14.3). This is particularly true at the grass roots (targeting farmer field schools and community workers for example) and at what might be considered high levels (meetings with ministry officials, round tables, national and regional dialogues). Building relationships, whether with ministers, officials in ministries and national institutions or community groups and farmers, takes commitment and constancy. At all levels 'show and tell' is a valuable tool.

Box 14.3

Persistent face-to-face communication
"…[G]etting the main issues and concerns on the agenda of CARICOM … required face-to-face interaction with the CARICOM Secretariat and the political directorate. These meetings assumed significant importance and were considered critical by the project leader in achieving buy-in at the levels of the political directorate and senior policy makers and policy implementers."[46]

Tap into existing channels of communication. Don't trust to luck. The flexibility needed to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities like meetings is important. But, a more effective strategy is to find out how target groups communicate and tap into these existing channels—use them to inform, persuade and influence. There are many events on development schedules and networks at regional and national levels that provide openings.

Your situation and stakeholder analysis, and your planning and scheduling of communication activities needs to identify and capitalize on opportunities to talk to the right people in the right places at the right times.

Use appropriate ways of communicating and finding information, including the internet[47]. The amount of information downloaded from programme and project websites shows that the internet is a valuable repository of all kinds of information. Now, many professionals in the developing world have varying degrees of access to this resource. But, most people at the grass roots level aren't able to access or use the internet, and many of those at high levels don't have time to use it. Again, strategic planning will help show whether the internet is likely to be a useful tool in any particular effort to out-scale or up-scale research results.

[46] P4 Box 4 Norrish, P. 2006. 'Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice'.

[47] "…the use of the Internet … is relatively new and little is known about [the] reach, equity and effectiveness [of websites and email discussion groups]. …learning-and uptake-require more than simply making information available." P5 Norrish, P. 2006. 'Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice'.