Communication for research uptake promotion: learning from practice

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Effective communication for research uptake promotion requires good planning, stakeholder engagement, and development of useful and usable communication products. Achieving these elements requires specialist input, adequate time and resources, and learning from practice.

Key messages

- Communication planning is crucial for research uptake promotion projects. Flexible plans, developed with specialist help and supported by flexible budgets, allow for the most effective communication.
- Successful engagement with stakeholders is central to communication for uptake promotion. Sufficient skills and resources are needed to achieve this: close and repeated interaction, often face-to-face and one-to-one, is typically required.
- Developing effective communication products is difficult, and seldom achieved by projects. Key needs are for project teams to have the communication knowledge, skills and experience to achieve this.
- Diverse communication skills are needed for effective communication. Communication specialists should be included on project teams to assist with communication activities as well as to provide training in communication skills.
- Dissemination of information via electronic media is widespread, but little is known about the reach and effectiveness of this communication pathway. More study is needed on the limitations and potential of these media for research uptake.
- Specific monitoring and evaluation of communication activities within projects is needed. The effects of communication on research uptake are often only fully apparent in the longer term, and so later assessment is important for learning what does and what does not work and so developing improved communication practice.
- Good communication practices are sometimes shared, but often remain confined to the project. Institutional learning and organisational capacity for communication need to be improved to enable wider influence and the creation of models of good practice.
- The skills, resources and time to achieve effective communication are typically underestimated in project planning and implementation. Research funders and programme managers need to recognise this and to ensure that communication is adequately resourced.

Summary

The DFID Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS) recognised the importance of communication for achieving research impact, and promoted good practice in various ways. A synthesis study across six of the RNRRS research programmes and their projects sought to assess the effects of their communication, and to derive lessons for improved practice. Approaches to communication strategies varied between programmes, but all had mandatory requirements to include communication within project design and implementation, and all provided support, such as guidelines and training, to fulfil these.

However, the strategic use of communication by programmes and communication practice by projects differed. Communication activities in projects that had a communication research element were more comprehensive, and provide valuable lessons for better practice. These projects emphasise the time, resources and range of specialist skills needed for effective communication since this relies on close engagement with stakeholders, on the development of useful and usable communication products, and on identifying and learning from practice to enhance individual and organisational communication capacity.

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Poverty reduction through partnerships in natural resources research

Background

Achieving developmental impact depends on the development and uptake of relevant research products. This in turn depends on effective communication throughout the research and uptake promotion processes. Recognising this, in recent years many research programmes have given increasing attention to communication within projects, and to improving the communication skills of researchers. This has been supported by substantial research on communication for development.

Since its inception in 1995, DFID's RNRRS has put increasing emphasis on communication, and has commissioned research on it both within and across its programmes. The RNRRS research programmes, and the projects within the programmes, have responded with a range of initiatives on communication – some more formally structured under communication strategies, others a series of communication activities with a less formal structure.

At the culmination of the RNRRS, a synthesis study was commissioned to assess these communication strategies and activities, and to identify lessons that could improve communication practice. The study evaluated communication strategies and activities within six of the RNRRS programmes, and then examined the effects of these at the project level. It also looked at the support for communication provided to projects by programmes. The aim of the study was to establish evidence-based good practice in communication for uptake promotion within natural resources research, and to develop an evidence-based framework for managing, monitoring and evaluating communication practice. This Brief presents the lessons identified from the synthesis study to improve communication practice for better research outcomes.

Several of the projects examined included a communication research element. A strong feature of these projects is the extent of reflective documentation they provide on their use and experience of communication. These projects contributed significantly to the findings of the study and provide the basis of learning from practice about the needs and use of communication in research programmes and projects.

Communication requirements and support

The approach to communication within the RNRRS has changed greatly over recent years. Programme managers are now fully committed to communication for research uptake promotion.

While none of the six RNRRS programmes in the synthesis study had a formal communication strategy, all had plans or strategies for uptake promotion in which communication activities were central. All programmes provided budgets for communication activities and products.

Mandatory requirements for projects varied between programmes, but included:
- Communication planning at the start of a project, either in the form of a separate document or built into the project proposal, and reviewed and revised during the project's lifespan
- Hosting inception and project completion workshops
- Holding pre-proposal stakeholder meetings and producing reports
- Production of policy or practice briefing notes.

Support for researchers on developing and implementing communication activities also varied across programmes, and included:
- Guidelines on preparing communication plans, and on expectations at different stages of the project
- Training courses in communication methods and advocacy
- Providing a CD of 'good practice' projects to help researchers during different stages of implementing their communication plans
- Encouragement to hire in communication expertise
- Commissioning communication research to inform programme strategy.

Communication planning

Project teams appreciated the emphasis on and support for communication activities, which increased awareness of the importance of communication within research projects. They also felt this contributed to them becoming more innovative in their approaches, and more critical of their own communication work.

Project teams found it very useful to produce a communication plan (see Box 1). Guidelines on producing plans are appreciated. Many researchers value personal guidance from a communication specialist on using the guidelines. They also benefitted from in-country specialist help provided during the development and implementation of a communication plan, rather than as one input

Box 1. Mandatory communication plans

"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. I think that it has improved the quality of our work in that 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. It has also been useful in our project, in that part of our research is to critically analyse the institutional processes in managing the environment."

Researcher

during the planning phase. Researchers also appreciate feedback on their communication plan at key stages of the project. The flexibility to adapt the plan in response to changing circumstances is important, for example, to bring on board new stakeholders. This also requires flexibility within the budget.

Short training courses in communication and advocacy or in developing a communication plan for a specific project are also useful to researchers. The courses raise awareness of the importance of communication (see Box 2), and many participants share what they have learned with colleagues. Participants also indicated that they are now committed to communication planning to the extent that they are building it into their project proposals to other funding agencies. Even if, as one reported "they [other funders] are not so rigorous in their demands [on including communication] as DFID".

Box 2. Training courses

"The course helped me to think of different aspects and potential target groups of which I was only dimly aware before the course. If anything, the course and the interactions with a very diverse and interesting group of participants have greatly increased my motivation to try and disseminate the results of my research to relevant decision makers and the public at large... I am instilling the importance of communication and advocacy into my PhD students as it is they who are doing most of the actual research work."

Training course participant

Engagement with stakeholders

Successful engagement with stakeholders is fundamental to effective communication for uptake promotion. To be successful, a range of approaches is necessary to meet the varying needs of different stakeholder groups.

Considerable time is required to negotiate with stakeholders, even when there is a functioning network with which to connect. Uptake pathways must be identified, and communication strategies developed through iterative processes of consultation and pre-testing with different groups. Adequate time, resources and skills are essential to put the required components in place (see Box 3).

Realistic estimates of the time, resources and skills required for researchers to engage with stakeholders, and then to develop and test communication products that meet the needs of the audience, should be a major consideration when

Box 3. Stakeholder engagement: preparing fertile ground

"...we think that we got our message about institutional partnerships (i.e. NGO–government–private sector) in agricultural R&D across to the relevant quarter (i.e. reasonably high up in ICAR). This has taken:
- A 3-day workshop in Delhi, at which actors in successful partnerships shared their experiences
- Some in-office meetings with key stakeholders, to explain what the initiative was all about and get them to join the last day of the workshop for a panel discussion
- A post-workshop meeting with one of the key stakeholders, which was supported by a brief produced within 24 hours and sent to key stakeholders
- A policy brief distilling the workshop outputs and offering some operational guidelines: this took 16 days of a professional writer (in addition to his attending the workshop) and a 3–4 month time-span
- The coincidence of the beginning of a World Bank project (National Agriculture Innovation Project, NAIP) in which one of the buzz-words is 'partnership'.

It could well be argued that the last was the most important of all! Fertile ground in which a message can take root is needed, and here the World Bank project may well have provided the fertiliser. However, getting the message to the appropriate bit of ground took quite an effort (and cost)."

Researcher

developing proposals. These requirements are commonly underestimated. Research funders and managers need to recognise the importance of these factors for effective communication, and to establish procedures and criteria for ensuring that they are adequately covered in proposals.

The importance of face-to-face, often one-to-one, interaction was emphasised by many projects (see Box 4). Small meetings have some advantages over workshops as a means of communicating with stakeholders; for example, the real decision makers often do not have time to participate in workshops. Face-to-face communication is also the preferred means of communication by farmers and farmers' groups. Such close and repeated engagement involves significant time and effort.

Box 4. The need for close interaction

"…getting 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. 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."

Communication specialist

Communication products

Review and testing of communication products by both communication specialists and end users is a necessary step in developing effective communication products. This is not always done, and the quality of the products is not always high (see Box 5). Materials are also often written in isolation from end users, are translated once written rather than being written in the language of use, and are tested on peers rather than end users.

It is important to test for the right things, with the right people, and to be able to analyse the test results and integrate the analysis into product revisions. This requires specialist skills. The employment, in the early stages of design, of a competent typographic designer who is trained in usability

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Box 5. Reviewing and testing communication products

"Even with English as a first language, the content, style and sheer size of the documents [a practical guide and technical guidelines] was difficult to negotiate…they would defeat a lot of readers. Prose style laborious, with too many extended, multi-clause sentences. Layout didn't help; tables, figures and boxes need to earn their place by being genuinely useful, and even then they should not interrupt the flow of the body text. Some graphics are illegible..."

Communication specialist

"The heading [of the poster] should be in bold capital letters and the font (size) needs to be increased. Round numbering shines and is not easy to read from a distance. Not every one can read and understand English – need to translate it to the local language as well. It contains too many words cramped up. It is a poster not a book chapter! Problems are on top and not matched with the solutions, which are below. Perhaps uniform numbering could have helped out on this."

Farmer

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studies, and someone with skills in product testing, can help to improve product quality.

Specialist input

Mandatory requirements for communication and support to meet those requirements, though useful, are not always enough for projects to achieve effective communication. Engagement with stakeholders requires diverse skills, as does developing good communication products. While some projects are working in very enlightened ways, the study showed that there are skills gaps that are not being met, even with the support provided by programmes.

Communication activities include, for example, developing communication plans; carrying out stakeholder needs and context analysis; facilitating and maintaining good collaborative working practices; advocacy work; writing, designing, testing and producing printed materials, videos and websites; running on-line discussions; and monitoring communication activities and materials in use.

To meet this need for diverse communication skills, communication specialists should be routinely included in projects. For small projects this may mean hiring in specific expertise at key points in the project. For larger projects, including a communication specialist as a full team member may be justified, as well as hiring in additional specialists for short-term inputs as necessary.

Electronic media

The research programmes and projects all use electronic media for communicating information. All the programmes and many projects have websites. The number of e-mail-based discussion groups is increasing. Although these are well used in terms of downloads and numbers registering for discussions, the use of the Internet in these ways is relatively new and little is known about their reach, equity and effectiveness. Provision of information is increasingly easy via the Internet, but learning – and uptake – require more than simply making information available. This is an important area where more study is needed on the limitations and potential of this medium for research uptake.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Communication activities need to be included within regular project monitoring and evaluation, and feedback used to improve communication approaches and products. This is often not the case. Also, projects are usually not long enough for communication outcomes to occur and to be assessed within the project period, especially when products are promoted towards the end of the project. An extended assessment period is required to measure the effectiveness of communication activities and products on research uptake and impact (see Box 6). Without such an assessment it is difficult to learn what does and what does not work, and, consequently, difficult to develop the evidence base for improved communication practice.

Sharing experiences

There is evidence that prolonged contact with RNRRS projects, often through a sequence of projects, has influenced the way individuals, and through them their organisations, are now working in communication (see Box 7). However, there is little evidence of cross-programme learning or networking on

communication within the RNRRS, even among those programmes from the same organisation. There is more evidence of learning between projects within one programme. For example, programmes sometimes hold workshops where projects discuss common themes or initiatives, and some have mechanisms for cross-project learning and for that learning to be fed back to the programme.

Without mechanisms to ensure wider learning, good communication practice will tend to remain

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Box 6. Time scales

"One frustration we had with this project was that it focused very interestingly and relevantly on uptake but then of course the time frame is completely dysfunctional for actually measuring uptake: it would in fact be extremely interesting to assess uptake but that means structuring the project in a different kind of way. It may mean doing what they've done now and then having another phase a year from now and three years from now and five years from now. You can learn that people received the message, referred to the message, remembered the message but can't really say that that message changed people's behaviour in such a short time frame."

Researcher

Box 7. Learning from practice

The Center for Natural Resource Studies in Bangladesh has worked on several RNRRS projects, including uptake and communication research projects that employed a communication specialist.

"We thought we were experts at communication but now realise we are learners. During this collaboration we came to realise that our approach to communication had been much too narrow; that communication needs attention from the start of a project; that materials need adequate pre-testing; and that we needed to include national as well as local stakeholders in their work. We now see the need to involve others in communication planning – previously we planned by ourselves. Working on these projects has helped us increase our organisational capacity in communication. Communication guidelines alone were not sufficient – projects need either a communication specialist to help them or training in communication skills."

Center Director

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confined to individual projects and the potential for greater impact on research uptake will be lost. Institutional learning and organisational capacity are important resources for creating wider influence and models of good communication practice from which other research programmes can benefit.

About this Brief

NRSP Briefs present research carried out at the culmination of the Programme to synthesise results across projects. They derive lessons and key messages that could benefit future research and policy on a range of topics that added to or crosscut the NRSP and RNRRS research agenda.

This Brief is based on **NRSP Project R8492, A synthesis of communication products and practices across the RNRRS**. Details of this project and its publications, and those of other NRSP projects, can be found in the Project Database at the NRSP website: www.nrsp.org.uk

Details of the other RNRRS programmes included in this study can be found at:

CPHP – Crop Post-Harvest Programme
www.cphp.uk.com

CPP – Crop Protection Programme
www.cpp.uk.com

FMSP – Fisheries Management Science Programme
www.fmsp.org.uk

FRP – Forestry Research Programme
www.frp.uk.com

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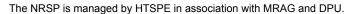www.lpp.uk.com

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