

Communicating the results

The key to a good communications strategy is stakeholder participation throughout the project cycle.

There is no doubt that research in developing countries has contributed significantly to the knowledge and understanding of natural resources. But there are doubts about how this information is passed on to farmers and others who need it and just how successful it has been in helping them to sustain and improve their livelihoods. Extension services are meant to do this job but too often they only benefit a small and educated minority and state agencies are often concerned with increasing productivity, rather than the sustainable use of natural resources.

It is well recognised that farmers need a good, varied, supply of information and the skills to interpret and use it. Natural resources research is now focusing on what people need and projects are designed to involve them at every stage of the process. But to do this properly, projects need to have a good communications strategy, planned from the beginning and based on an understanding of who needs to communicate with whom. It means that researchers need to talk and listen to the full range of stakeholders from the very start of a project and at every step of the way until it is completed.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STRATEGY?

The elements of a good communications strategy are:

- Well defined target groups and their information needs.
- A clear framework for identifying,

recording, monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of uptake pathways.

- A clear statement of who is responsible for dissemination, and how far that responsibility extends.
- Communication expertise amongst project staff and ideas of how to link into local expertise.
- Good relations between project leaders and collaborators.
- The building up of local networks and activities to support them.
- A mechanism for programmes and projects to exchange experience.
- Resources for carrying out communication activities.



BUT IS IT HAPPENING?

The idea of a communications strategy is a well accepted one but is it being put into practice on projects and if so is it successful? Six natural resources research projects currently underway in Ghana, India and Bolivia were visited to find out. Just what are their strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities, and the challenges they face in communicating and disseminating the results?

All aspects of the projects from the pre-concept note to the final workshop were investigated from the view point of how accessible was the research team to programme and project



personnel and the wide range of stakeholders with whom they worked. This was not just about the availability of people, but an

examination of formal and informal communications in which individual and group discussions, emails, phone calls and workshops all play a part. Individual discussions with professionals and stakeholders allowed people to talk not just about how well the project was going but also about the things that had gone wrong. Interestingly, people wanted to publicise

PROJECTS CAN IMPROVE THEIR COMMUNICATIONS BY:

- Including an inception phase to investigate communication issues with stakeholder groups and negotiate a strategy which meets their needs and capacities.
- Establishing good collaborative links and build them up over time to provide the pathways for dissemination.
- Establishing good working relationships between project staff and collaborators.
- Using local skills to help build capacity and ensure sustainability.
- Building up of local networks and activities to support them.
- Attempting to match dissemination to different needs.

In India a local NGO was commissioned to produce songs and dramas to promote useful exotic tree species. They have been successfully building on a well-established local tradition of live drama and song for some time.

the failures as well as the successes so that others could learn from their experiences.

A forestry project in India, for example, with a long history of research had the improvement of information dissemination as its main objective. Initiatives were established to provide rapid and easy access to research results, including publication of newsletters, publication of research highlights and internet discussion groups. Networks, already established under previous projects were to be strengthened further, with the UK agency taking less of a coordinating role and regional managers becoming more prominent. Although many pathways were established and used successfully there was no systematic appraisal made of the means of information dissemination either before or during project implementation.



Another project was investigating the rapid changes that accompany urban growth around a major city in Ghana

and the pressure this puts on access to and use of natural resources. People living in peri-urban areas who were mainly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, have to cope with growing urbanisation and adjust their livelihood strategies accordingly. In the early stages of the project, a workshop was held for all those involved but presentations took little account of dissemination issues. One working group did discuss the means of ensuring the uptake of research results and identified possible approaches. But the remaining working groups did not address the issue despite this being an

In Bolivia booklets have been produced locally in Santa Cruz on agro-forestry crops, cover crops and participatory research methods. They are aimed at extension workers and farmers with limited reading skills. Copies were hand-delivered to all participating farmers.

aim of the exercise. Nor was thought given to who would be responsible for dissemination, and where the funding for it would come from. These issues, although not part of the research group's immediate remit will clearly need to be addressed.

All the projects visited were using some elements of the recommended strategy.

Unfortunately none of them were using all of them together and so dissemination of information is rather unco-ordinated.



WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Clearly project staff need support. Advice is needed on communications and how to develop a good strategy. Information is also needed on best practice and about materials, communication technologies and people who can advise on communications. A good communications strategy needs a 'driver' and the arguments strongly favour this being a communication expert, either employed full-time on a project or brought in from outside as and when needed.

Best Practice Guidelines are one of the outputs of this research. They focus on putting in place a communication strategy from the design stage of a project. But they will only help if the pre-requisites are in place, namely a project which is demand-led, participatory, has an understanding

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Improved Communication Strategies for the Promotion and Dissemination of Renewable Natural Resources Research Outputs. Socio-economic Methodologies for Natural Resources Research available from Natural Resources Institute, Chatham, UK.

- Practical advice on the steps establishing a communications strategy
- A reference guide to communication technologies
- A bibliography of practical materials
- A directory of organisations and communications specialists.

of those with whom it wants to communicate, has a strong and active working relationship with collaborators, has its own dissemination capacity and a good track record of two-way communication with intermediate/end users.

R7037 Improving Communications for the Promotion and Dissemination of NR Research Outputs to Intermediate and End Users.

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