

Ten Questions to Guide the Development of Communications Tactics for Research Projects

An IISD Knowledge Communications Practice Note

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The practices outlined here are based on the concept of IISD’s “Influencing Strategy,”¹ but focus more specifically on the issue of tactics—how to move your knowledge into the hands of the people you seek to influence. These planning guidelines are followed by a brief inventory of communications approaches and tools.

A communications plan should be developed for every research project from the very beginning—at the project design stage, prior to the securing of funding—rather than at the end of the project. Communications needs to be incorporated into the work plan and budget to ensure that research results are not only published, but used. Once funding has been confirmed, in whole or in part, the communications plan should be implemented—integrated with the other work plan activities of the project, and carried out simultaneously with the research itself.

The communications plan for a project should address:

- Internal communications – facilitating the interaction among the collaborators on a given piece of work, who are also often the direct beneficiaries of that work; and
- External communications – the means by which both progress on a piece of work and the results of that work are shared with stakeholders, target audiences and more broadly.

Three principal concepts should be kept in mind at all times:

- Direct engagement of target audiences as stakeholders, partners and strategic allies in the work being undertaken.
- Integrated use of communications media and channels to reach out to and engage the target and broader audiences. In other words, moving beyond placing an electronic copy (a “PDF”) of a book on a Web site to developing a range of products (print, electronic, audio/video) and planning interventions to attract users to those products.
- Evaluation of the results of the communications plan—take-up of messages and findings, and contribution towards achieving the desired outcomes of the project itself.

¹ <http://www.iisd.org/networks/>

Ten Questions to Ask When Planning Communications for Research Projects

1. What do you anticipate may be the mid- to long-term outcome(s) of the project?

Too often, projects focus on a specific deliverable—the publication of a set of case studies, or the holding of consultations with a community—rather than an outcome. What is it you want to change? A change in levels of awareness and understanding on a particular issue? A change in a government or IGO policy? A change in a company practice? This can be very short, even expressed in bullet points. But it is important to be able to articulate this if you want your work to be used: *what* you want to change will dictate with *whom* you need to communicate.

2. Who are the individuals you most want to engage or influence with the project?

Move beyond stipulating that you intend to influence business, government and civil society. Be specific in naming representatives within government departments, companies and civil society organizations. *Make an effort to name 10–20 key individuals whom you most want to use the findings of your research.* Beyond that, focus on specific positions within sectors, e.g., Assistant Deputy Ministers responsible for policy development in specific departments; or the top mutual fund managers in Europe and North America.

3. Are you working with one or more partners (other organizations) on the project?

Consider how you might include those you most want to change/engage /influence from your target group in the actual work of the project, through consultations, advisory panels and other means.

4. How do you want to work together to achieve the outcome?

There are a number of different models for collaboration, such as:

- a formal strategic alliance or knowledge network;
- an informal working group;
- a series of face-to-face workshops;
- staff exchanges; and
- placing an intern or graduate student with the partner to facilitate interaction.

For a discussion of models of collaboration, consult Strategic Intentions: Managing Knowledge Networks for Sustainable Development.²

5. What internal communications support tools will you need to work with your partner(s)?

Do you need additional hardware and software to facilitate your working together? Do you need to put a computer into a community or organization you are working with? Do you need to provide information and communications technology (ICT) training? Will you need a closed e-mail list for project participants? Will you need to establish an online collaborative workspace supported by tools such as document repositories and shared task calendars?

6. What are all of the possible products/services that could be delivered *throughout* the project cycle?

In other words, don't wait to the end of a project to tell your target group and other audiences what you are working on. Consider sharing basic concepts, assumptions, hypotheses and preliminary findings. Some useful approaches:

- releasing a preliminary or foundation report, or draft working paper;
- setting up a project Web page and listserv or blog;
- holding a series of workshops or briefing sessions;
- holding an electronic conference to solicit input on work in progress;
- publishing a commentary/opinion piece in the press on work in progress;
- and
- establishing a database of best practices/information sources/data to which audiences can add.

Towards the end of the project, you will need to consider how you intend to package and release your findings:

- a final report or book;
- a consulting report;
- policy briefs, in print and online;
- articles prepared for peer reviewed journals;
- a press release and media launch; and/or
- a Web site.

As a rule of thumb: *Every project should result in a policy brief and a press release, in addition to the full research report.*

² Creech, H. and Willard, T. Strategic Intentions: Managing Knowledge Networks for Sustainable Development. IISD, 2001. <http://www.iisd.org/networks/>.

7. What are the principal information gathering points and media contact points for the target group?

Understand the information-seeking patterns of your target group. Not everyone reads self-published research reports; but they may absorb the key findings through other channels:

- conference presentations;
- forums where decision-makers gather (e.g., World Economic Forum; Liaison Delegates meeting of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development);
- reviews of your work on the Web sites of other institutions;
- e-mail lists;
- newspapers and magazines;
- refereed journals;
- broadcast interviews and programs (TV, radio); and/or
- Webcasts (podcasts, blogs, video).

8. What are the key messages from this project that you want to communicate to your target audience.

These are short, simple, plain language statements that capture the essence of your findings.

9. How do you want to promote and distribute the final deliverables to the target group?

- conference or workshop to release the findings;
- series of editorials in key newspapers;
- interviews with project partners on radio and news stations;
- promotion via listservs; and/or
- press releases

10. How do you intend to inform broader audiences of the work?

- public electronic conferences to comment on final reports;
- publication of final project reports on your Web site; and/or
- selling the book through commercial distributors, such as Amazon.com.

An inventory of communications approaches and related tools

This section lists a number of communications practices and tools. Not all tools will be appropriate in all circumstances.

Approach	Description
Communications through group processes: “many to many”	Based on principles of participation and the belief that solutions developed collectively are more likely to be implemented than those imposed by others. Innovation comes about through dialogue and joint problem-solving.
Tool	
C4D	Communications for Development: the practice of using communications and engagement methods to facilitate international development processes, primarily at the community level. Emphasis is on horizontal communications: facilitating community/grassroots stakeholders to speak to each other about their concerns, needs and capabilities, exploring solutions within the community, and learning how to bring their views to the attention of others.
Appreciative inquiry	An organizational development tool focused on the principle of positive change. A participatory process that engages all stakeholders in exploring values, assets and contributions
Participatory video	The use of video to record participatory processes in order to capture and share back to participants the exchange of views.
E-conferencing	Electronic conferencing: the use of e-mail or discussion boards to bring together dispersed groups to discuss issues of common interest. Asynchronous in nature. Participants are usually invited.
Chat rooms	Attracts dispersed participants to discuss issues of common interest in real time but virtual space. Participants are self selected.
Simulations/gaming	Brings together participants in real time, either in person or virtually, to solve simulated problems or tasks.
Conferences, negotiations	Both a group process and a dissemination process: brings together participants in real time to debate ideas and positions, and to solve problems. In recent times, the knowledge-sharing components of major international meetings have proven more successful

	than the actual problem identification and negotiations of commitments to address those problems.
Communications by dissemination: “One to many”	The delivery of an individual’s or organization’s information, knowledge and beliefs to others. Innovation comes from feedback loops: encouraging responses to the knowledge provided.
Tool	
Publishing (Web, print, CD)	Trend is towards convergence and speed of publishing practices: more and more integration of book production with simultaneous release on the Web; increased use of digital printing for faster production times and shorter print runs; use of CD to package large volumes of content for audiences with limited Internet access.
Online databases, meta-databases	Structured information with a user interface that supports search and retrieval of data subsets. Meta databases attempt to link or relate varieties of data and information. The structure of the database itself often communicates a particular perspective on an issue.
Wiki technology	Allows open editing of Web sites: anyone can contribute content; and anyone can edit someone else’s content.
E-mail lists, newsletters	Used either for an individual or organization to periodically send out information to a group of subscribers. Subscribers are either pre-selected by the sender, or choose to subscribe in order to receive the content.
Web advertising	Evolved from the concept of “pull” technology—pulling users into Web sites. Used either internally on a Web site to promote other sections of a Web site (e.g., pop-up screens inviting users to subscribe to a newsletter); or purchased on major portals (e.g., purchasing key words on Google that lead to Web ads popping up on the search results page).
RSS feeds	Really Simple Syndication: used to create a news feed from a Web site to a user’s computer. Useful to the user for tracking new additions to favourite Web sites, without having to log on to each one. Evolved from the concept of “push” technology—pushing information out to users.
Blogs	Personal Web logs or online diaries. Used for the expression of personal views and knowledge. Often created within larger Web communities dealing with common interests. Of growing interest to

	corporations as a means to encourage the expression of new ideas.
Theatre and the arts	In the development field, the use of story-telling, street theatre murals and other artistic processes to attract audiences and communicate messages in more accessible ways. Recognizes that communications is not dependent on literacy.
Media (print, radio, TV)	The targeting of, and building relationships with, journalists and editors as both an audience that shapes public discourse, and a means to reach decision-makers responsive to public discourse. Also the direct use of radio and TV/video production to deliver knowledge. Like theatre, also recognizes that communications is not dependent on literacy.
Social marketing	The adoption of mass media practices (advertising, branding, etc.) for the promotion of social messages, with a view to influencing individual behavioural change on a larger scale.
Corporate communications	The use of corporate identifiers, newsletters, annual reports and other means to raise the profile and recognition factor of an organization.
Accountability communications	Corporate social, economic, environmental reporting; endorsement/adoption of principles and standards as a means to demonstrate responsibility to stakeholders and broader audiences.
Restricted/secure communications: “one to one,” or “a few to a few”	Based on two concepts: the desire to catalyze and support the interaction of individuals and teams; and the concept of “safe spaces,” where individuals feel empowered to take risks and express thoughts more freely. As with group process communications, innovation comes about through dialogue and joint problem-solving. But there is also a strong efficiency element: the provision of tools to individuals to support and speed up their interaction.
Tool	
E-mail	Considered to be the single greatest innovation in the ICT field.
Intranet	Restricted access Web site to employees of an organization, supporting the management process of the organization. Used to post policies, directories, minutes, meetings, etc. Often includes an internal staff news function, for staff to promote events, trips, recent research, etc.
Extranet	Same concept as Intranet, only access is provided to a select group of organizations in a network, partnership or alliance, for the purpose of managing

	their collaboration.
Groupware	Collaborative work tools that allow dispersed groups of individuals to work together to draft and edit documents, build shared databases, “whiteboard” ideas, schedule meetings, and manage projects, tasks and timelines. See D-Groups (http://www.dgroups.org) for an application of groupware technology for international development work.
Instant messaging	Similar to a phone call, only one type instead of speaks. Has the advantage over phone in the ease with which one can bring in others into the “conversation” if they happen to be online at the same time. Good for immediate problem-solving.
Team meetings	Growing recognition that even virtual teams will benefit from face-to-face (F2F) interaction from time to time.
Video conferencing	Recent studies indicate that video conferencing hasn’t quite lived up to its promise, due to expense of installations and connect time; or cost and inconvenience of participants having to meet at conferencing facilities outside of the immediate office. Internet video conferencing also has not significantly improved with respect to image resolution and speed of transmission.
Education and training	The transfer of knowledge and experience through formal and informal means.
Approaches	The key variations here involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • incorporation of knowledge into formal education curriculum, ensuring that concepts are part of an accredited program, and become a baseline for future work; • targeted training, professional development, etc., ensuring that individuals have access to new knowledge; • use of face-to-face training methods (classroom, workshops, etc.); and • use of distance education methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Facilitated learning</i>: Provision of materials (in print or online) combined with interaction virtually (by video conference or e-mail) with an instructor, and possibly with other course participants. ○ <i>Self directed</i>: Provision of materials combined with automated assessment against learning objectives.

IISD's Knowledge Communications program works at the intersection of communications, networks and sustainable development knowledge. Research and communications go hand in hand; IISD can make a difference in the world by sharing what we know—and what others know—about sustainability.