



Research Technical Assistance Center (RTAC)
USAID DRIVE Convening: Best Practices on Research Dissemination and Communication
Tuesday, November 9, 2021
10:00 - 11:00 a.m.

Presenters

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Discussants

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Moderator

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Communicating Research: A Roadmap (PRB)

Developing Communication Products

- Communication objectives
 - Research goals vs. communication goals
- Audiences and intended outcomes
- Appropriate communication channels
- Required resources
- Budget and timeline
- Measurement

See table in slide 11 in the slide deck for a descriptive look at how to develop communication products for different stakeholders.

Best Practices for Research Dissemination

What is a dissemination plan?

- It is a plan for how to share research findings or products with those who will use the information in practice. This is arguably one of the most critical aspects of any research endeavor and it is the plan used for spreading your findings to those who'll use the information in practice. This is something teams should be thinking about early on. It's what will help you get the message out to the right audience in the most effective way possible.

There are four major strategies for effective research dissemination. They are:

1. Take a targeted approach.
2. Create opportunities for two-way knowledge exchange.
3. Use digital platforms to increase visibility.
4. Apply more than one dissemination approach.

1) Take a Targeted Approach

- Effective targeted dissemination is about building and maintaining relationships
- Identify your audience and how you will reach them
- Tactics used in this approach include
 - Phone calls
 - Personal outreach emails
 - Informal, one-on-one conversations
 - In-person briefings with key decision makers
 - Updates at work group meetings
 - Host action planning workshops rather than traditional dissemination events
 - Engaging with influential people

2) Two-Way Knowledge Exchange

- Use in-person approaches to create a two-way knowledge exchange.
- Examples of two-way knowledge exchange approaches include:
 - Expert consultations.
 - Presentations or panels.
 - Question-and-answer sessions at conferences.
 - Conferences to review and debate evidence.
 - Dissemination events.
 - One-on-one meetings.
 - Study tours.

3) Digital Platforms

- Use digital platforms to support broad sharing of information and get your research out to a larger audience.
- Examples of digital dissemination tools include:
 - Listservs/Newsletters.
 - Blogs.
 - Social Media Networks.
 - Project Website.
 - Online Resource Repositories.
 - Online Communities of Practice.
 - Podcasts.
 - Webinars.

4) A Multi-pronged approach

- Apply more than one dissemination approach.
- Use multiple approaches to help magnify impact.
- Use a mix of strategies for effective dissemination.

Evaluate Your Efforts

- How many people did your dissemination activities reach?
- Did your activities reach your intended audience?
- Tools for analyzing efforts:
 - Website analytics.
 - User surveys.
 - Social media analysis—who is sharing your material/content?

Poll #1: Have you developed any of these communications products for a non-research audience?

1. Policy Brief
2. Fact sheet
3. Infographic
4. Video
5. Other

Lessons From RTAC (PRB)

- Worked with nine teams on developing a communication product.
- Topics included:
 - Youth unemployment in Morocco.
 - Land governance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
 - Wildfires in Colombia's tropical forests.
 - Tuberculosis tracing in the Philippines.
 - Impact of hydroelectric dams on the Amazon River ecosystem in Brazil.
- Communication products play a valuable role in bridging the gap between research and action.
- Products must be part of a larger outreach strategy.
- Identifying key audiences helps maintain focus.
- Key messages should be jargon-free and targeted to your audience(s).
- Be flexible. Adapt your strategy, as needed.

Poll #2: What challenges have you faced in developing communication products for non-research audiences?

- Getting it in front of the targeted audience
- Wide variation in baseline knowledge means very difficult to balance technical rigor with accessibility
- Keeping the key messages succinct and jargon-free
- Knowing which aspect of the research is most applicable to their needs
- Digestible graphs (in terms of information and key findings)
- The language to be used and culture-related concerns
- Deciding which product should be done
- Attention. hard to get people to read I think, honestly
- Finding a forum where the audience will really engage
- Understanding impact of the messaging

- Determining the most relevant data to change behavior or persuade a given audience
- Mixed audience. It is difficult to come by what suits all
- Keeping the information succinct
- Making sure the products are "actionable" is often challenging
- The language to use.
- Toning down the technical language...
- Finding a jargon-free message, that is not wordy
- Where are the answers to be selected?
- Getting feedback on the communication product from the audience
- Understanding the target audience - who they are, how they receive info, why they should care
- My challenge is technical: I know what messages I want to convey via visualization/briefs but my visualization skills are poor and comms people are not always helpful
- Trying to get across nuance/research limitations while still crafting an understandable message
- Lack of institutional experience with this specific kind of Communications
- Biases that "academic" work has nothing to teach practitioners
- Toning down the technical language
- communication personnel and cost, plus the technical skill
- The right and appropriate material to use
- Getting an interested audience
- There should be a bridge as media tools is needed as such.
- Avoiding being too academic
- I'm better at communicating in a written format, but much of the communication is verbal
- Generational differences requiring the same main idea to be adapted with different language and style for different aged audiences
- Poor information quality.
- Getting good data / useful feedback on whether the communication products are being used

Conversation with Researchers

Dr. Dolores Armenteras, Universidad Nacional de Colombia:

- One challenge was converting "boring content" for various audiences to make the content relatable. Our primary audience was the government, as we wanted to help influence a change in regulations. A major goal was impacting policy to change current practices and convince all actors about the negative impacts of wildfires in Colombia. Some have been affected directly by negative impacts and others not.
- Among the challenges was finding the right way to communicate. We don't always communicate the same way in some cultures and there can be linguistic issues to consider.
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Ms. Floredeliza Bassiag, Isabela State University:

- Thanks to RTAC, PRB, and USAID for helping PEER researchers work on communications strategy and the development of a communications product. The fact sheet developed under RTAC was helpful to all of the stakeholders to understand complicated figures and scientific data.

- A challenge related to addressing tuberculosis in children is to have all involved (such as parents, children, health officers) to learn about barriers to diagnosis and treatment in children. Contact tracing involves the education of various stakeholders.
- RTAC/PRB coordinated everything so well. The kickoff meeting and subsequent communications went well despite spotty internet bandwidth and different time zones.
- Developing and completing the product took a while – 2.5 months – but we were happy that RTAC was flexible in the timeline. There were several opportunities to review content and to continue to design and develop the factsheet. We finished in October of 2020.
- We can't afford to pay for such a nice fact sheet, so this helped. It was translated into Tagalog. Throughout the process, the RTAC team was very encouraging. We gave them information and they took care of creating the product. The step-by-step manner in developing the product was helpful. We learned a lot about how to develop our own factsheets and related products.
- For dissemination we used Facebook and messenger as well as in-person meetings. We got to cities, local governments, and the provinces.
- Among the challenges we faced were not having internet access at home and working around the COVID lock downs.

Dr. Camila Ribas, Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia:

- The PEER-funded research on Amazon dams was helpful to document that habitats can be badly affected ecologically if an environmental impact assessment (EIA) doesn't consider the right impacts. The research team produced results on many problems but we originally targeted the environmental protection agency regulators who enforce the rules. The policy brief included recommendations for planning, licensing, and monitoring impacts. The brief included recommendations to revise the EIA manual and we also targeted the message toward the hydroelectric agency and eventually the public prosecutor.
- As for results, the EIA manual has been updated to reflect our research. The policy brief was quite effective to change these main documents about how to measure/monitor impacts of dam development on Amazonia.

Q&A

I. Question: How do we know these approaches are effective? Especially internally for organizations like USAID. I struggle to overcome disinformation about the importance of impact evaluations, applied research.

Answer: This comes back to measurement; how do we know up front how to measure impact? The dissemination approach determines how to measure. For example, if disseminating through social media,

you can measure uptake. If you are targeting the government, you can monitor how regulators change their approach. It comes down to the product itself and how you disseminate it. There are many ways to evaluate your efforts – analytics, user surveys. You should evaluate results and modify your approach as needed as you go along.

Question: If you found an approach to not be effective, how did you pivot?

Answers:

- It is hard to measure based on the number of people targeted. Communication is a process more than a product. One impact was that the number of forest fires decreased in Colombia after the product and strategy helped inform parliamentary debate in Colombia. Also, integrated fire management projects funded by USAID are now focusing on things that were not focused on before. It is important to focus on how to communicate from the beginning of planning the research.
- Perhaps we need to measure more formally, but we can measure if policy makers change based on findings and the product
- One way we measured was to see if the way EIAs were done were changing after the product was disseminated. A lot of things were not being done properly due to a lack of knowledge among regulators. We disseminated the product to agencies and showed how to address the correct things to monitor. We created some momentum to make things move faster.

2. Question: How do you make sure you disseminate so as to reach your target audience? Which dissemination channels did you use?

Answers:

- That starts from the beginning by looking at who your target audience should be. You can see what social media networks resonate with your audience (and how). You can talk to your partners and allies about how they are reaching the targeted audience. You need to define the audience (regulators vs. farmers, for example) and the audience will determine the type of product you need and the best mode of dissemination. Yes, use your professional network and allies to help disseminate the message. You have to meet your audience where they are. Such factors as literacy rates and access to technology can be important, so maybe use video, visuals, and radio.
- Yes, in rural areas, we need the radio. Livestream video programs are popular in our country in rural areas. For our audiences to appreciate what we're doing, we do different things. Training for village health workers is a preferred mode. Yes, we looked at communication preferences – healthcare workers in the Northern Philippines wanted training. We used a PowerPoint presentation and factsheet along with face-to-face meetings with policymakers. Eventually, the policymakers asked us to develop new products related to how to also address the pandemic. We developed a handbook on contact tracing for COVID based on the TB work and then it was translated into the dialects of certain communities. The broader research network is very important too – the PEER website helped.
- Specifically, we targeted the environmental protection agency at first but the product was also used by the public prosecutors and indigenous rights groups over time. Some of the success depends on the political moment of each place

- We used the communications products beyond our professional network and comfort zone. We learned the value of the continuous process of communicating.

3. Question: How do we tone down the technical language and be jargon free in our communication?

Answers:

- A trick Liselle often used is “how would you explain this to your grandmother over lunch?” It may help if you are forced to think about communicating to someone who is not your professional peer.
- Yes – how do you adjust to the language of various audiences? Think about speaking down to the level of the children. And you must adapt the language for different audiences with different levels of expertise and cultural styles.
- There is also a concern the other way around – when targeting technicians, we did not want to be too simple. They already know the substance but we are trying to get them to change the way they work. We aimed for Simplicity but also being useful and comprehensible for the specific audience.
- Yes, how do you write for clarity without losing the essence of the message you want to communicate.

4. Question: How do we know these approaches are effective? Especially internally for organizations like USAID. I struggle to overcome disinformation about the importance of impact evaluations, applied research.

Answer: This is a great question. Impact evaluations can help to determine the effectiveness of your communications and dissemination strategy. While impact evaluations can be a long and rigorous process, it can certainly help guide your actions for the future to help you determine if and how to alter your strategy.

[USAID offers a free note on impact evaluations](#) which can be very helpful to researchers and others looking to improve upon their communications and dissemination approaches.

5. Question: What web analytics would you recommend for evaluating our efforts for reaching our intended audience?

Answer: The first tool I’d recommend would be Google Analytics. It is free to use and relatively simple, while offering detailed statistics about visitors to your website.

Yahoo Web Analytics is also free, and some find it more helpful than Google Analytics as it offers more to the user in terms of profiling, filtering and customization.

There are of course other analytic programs that you can buy, but Google Analytics is my preferred choice.

6. Question: How can people define which product is best? What would have more impact?

Answer: Choosing the right communication product is dependent on your audience and goals. Look at [slide #6](#) for more information.

7. Question: What are good examples of how to measure the success of communication products beyond views/number of participants/etc., but not quite getting to long-term impacts like behavior change, that may happen after the life of the project?

Answer: To measure the success of your communications products, you really need to look at your dissemination approaches. Did you use more than one dissemination approach? The more methods used to disseminate your research, the better chance you have of your audience utilizing your research.

Using web analytics can be helpful to see who is downloading your products or looking at your site. Looking at social media look at metrics can help you see if you are reaching your intended audience.

Conversations with your partners can also be helpful. Talk to them to see who they disseminated to and how many people or organizations. See if they can provide you with analytics of their own.

8. Question: Do you have any recommendations to make sure your dissemination products (policy briefs, etc.) really reach your audiences? Which dissemination channels do you use?

Answer: We are often very reliant on our implementing partners to help us reach our target audiences. How do you ensure that your partners are bought-in to your communication goals to avoid a piecemeal approach to dissemination?

Consistent communication and having clearly defined objectives with your partners is the best approach. Be aware that you may have to alter approaches.