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Spreading the word: disseminating research findings

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Spreading the Word Further

Guidelines for Disseminating Development Research

About the project

Getting research findings out to those who stand to benefit from them is now widely recognised as a crucial aspect of any research project.

This synthesis note is a product of the second phase of a DFID-funded KaR project that is aimed at increasing the impact of research through improved dissemination of the research process and findings.

It develops the ideas from phase one of the project *'Spreading the Word: Practical guidelines for research dissemination strategies'* (Saywell and Cotton 1999).

Based on in-depth consultation with Southern agencies about appropriate methods and formats by which to share information and knowledge relating to development research projects, this note provides dissemination checklists and guidelines. It is a useful overview of the issues while offering more specific advice for anyone engaged in development-related research, whether as contractors, practitioners or donors, at all stages of the project cycle.

The Guidelines

These guidelines are meant to be just that – a guide rather than a prescriptive formula for dissemination, as it is recognised that the context of each research project can vary widely, and that different approaches to the dissemination of findings may therefore be needed.

The following checklists are intended to provide some direction for those engaged in development research on the issues to consider and how to proceed in designing and implementing a dissemination strategy.



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Guideline 1



Adopt a strategic approach to dissemination

- **Ideally, a strategic rather than an ad hoc approach to dissemination is preferable. An organisational dissemination strategy offers more than lots of individual strategies as there are potential benefits of sharing experience of reaching target audiences and of aggregating outputs for dissemination wherever possible. A dissemination framework for wider use based on what has been found to work can be developed from this.**
- **A more standardised institutional approach, where relevant, needs to be flexible enough to allow for specific circumstances, outputs and target audience needs and resources related to each project.**

Checklist 1

At organisational level

1. Review existing organisational dissemination practice:
    - Carry out an information audit, focusing on the way in which staff understand dissemination, what current practice is and what has been found to work successfully, collating the results into a framework for dissemination
    - Identify which audience groups the organisation needs to influence and where it needs to target advocacy materials
    - Relate dissemination to the organisational mission, to strengthen its perceived value and the priority given to it.

At project level

1. The planning team should include project team and steering committee members, plus wider stakeholders and interested parties as appropriate
2. Plan and integrate a dissemination strategy into the project lifecycle, by identifying when optimum opportunities are presented for dissemination
3. Identify priority areas of need i.e. who will the intended users be (those who use research to benefit the poor) and who will the beneficiaries of research outputs be (those for whom the research has a potentially direct impact)
4. Decide who will be responsible for co-ordinating dissemination activities
5. Plan to use a graduated model of proposed research outputs, which each have increasing detail, complexity and technical specialisation, as appropriate for the target audience
6. Provide detailed costings for each dissemination element.

Guideline 2



Knowing your target audience

- **The target audience is made up of the groups of key organisations that you want to influence and on which you want your research to impact.**
- **An important factor in determining the nature of the target group is the subject matter of the research itself, which will suggest the locations and settings where research findings have relevance. Factors such as the extent to which the research focuses on practical applications in the field, organisational issues or has state level policy implications also have a bearing on the selection of target groups and the type of output which should be disseminated to them.**
- **Once identified it is important to discover how information is received and used by target groups and how specific socio-cultural factors might affect this.**

Checklist 2

1. Draft a list of your proposed target audiences, working in collaboration with in-country partners if possible, to review and verify the list. This list is dependent on the research topic and which groups are to be influenced by the findings.

2. Carry out a user information needs analysis (e.g. by questionnaire or interview survey), taking into consideration the points listed below:

    - What it is that the poor or agencies representing/assisting them need to know?
    - How is that need demonstrated? Are there any indicators?
    - Is the research strictly relevant to the local context and is it perceived by potential users to be relevant?
    - What resources (skills, knowledge, and money) do users need to make use of that information?
    - What is the most appropriate information format e.g. the length of document, written style, language, non-written format for each target group?
    - What level of detailed content is appropriate (dependent on the depth of understanding of the issues required by those the project seeks to influence)?
    - What is the preferred means of dissemination, based on an understanding of locally available options?
    - This can be supplemented by data contained in the organisational dissemination strategy.

3. Work with in-country partners to identify potential uninterested users. Consider how to ensure that research outputs have a local relevance to their situation and engage appropriate intermediary organisations, who have close knowledge of these groups, to construct a strategy aimed at awareness raising in these groups.

Guideline 3



Hitting the target

- **A multi-channel approach to dissemination is most likely to hit the identified audience.**
- **In order to reach a wide general audience, consider using the mass media. However, before tapping into this as a potential dissemination vehicle, check how it is used in a particular location and ascertain what it is and is not effective for.**
- **Use of ICTs in their various forms depends on the level of local resources. We should be cautious in our assumptions about these, but we also need to be aware that ICTs have an actual and growing potential in sometimes unlikely locations.**

Checklist 3

1. Review what is known about the target audiences in terms of their information needs (to help guide the content), and the best ways in which to send them information (to help with decisions about which dissemination pathways to use).

2. Decide what is the function of the dissemination output at a particular point in the project cycle and what function it is to serve, e.g. is it to act as publicity, to generate feedback, or to communicate findings? This will aid decisions about the content, length and level of detail.

3. A far-reaching dissemination strategy in which communication flow extends horizontally to the academic community and funding bodies, 'downwards' to NGOs, practitioners and the poor, while at the same time providing channels for 'upwards' communication and participation, is likely to mean that the classic research report has very limited use, as it is generally lengthy and unfocused. Conversely, face-to-face communication brings research to life in a very unique way. Whatever media are chosen, the link between pathway and audience needs to be clear.

4. Researchers need to be aware of these to ensure that certain audiences are not disadvantaged by any outputs produced and that equal weight is given to each dissemination output.

5. Make imaginative use of all available and relevant pathways including conventional methods (journal article publications), opportunities for interpersonal communication (conference and workshop forums), using information and communication technologies (e-conferencing and the World Wide Web) and more traditional methods which allow the poor more easy access to information (posters and radio broadcasts).

6. Depending on the nature of the dissemination exercise, the range of outputs should be as broad as possible for the maximum reach. The basic message should be adapted to the needs of the different audiences, with varying levels of detail and technical information. Some questions to ask of the chosen format are:

    - Is it accessible to intended users?
    - Are there alternative and/or additional media which would better facilitate accessibility and comprehension?
    - Is it cost-effective?
    - Is personal interaction a possibility?
    - Is the medium simple?
    - Are electronic media supplemented by paper-based versions?

Guideline 3 *continued...*



- **We need to consider the use of less conventional dissemination methods used by in-country agencies and be creative in our choice of dissemination pathways, within the limitations which deadlines and budgets impose.**
- **The important role played by infomediaries cannot be underestimated. The local knowledge they possess of local information requirements and use, of organisations and communities, plus their perceived standing with target groups is invaluable. They can provide the entry point that may evade the researcher.**

Checklist 3 *continued...*

7. Consideration should be given to the use of possible infomediaries in providing communication channels. Things to consider are:

    - Is the source perceived to be competent, experienced and having credible motives?
    - What is its relationship to other trusted sources?
    - Is it sensitive to the concerns of the users?
    - Is it oriented towards dissemination and knowledge use?
    - Has appropriate use been made of infomediaries with established relationships with intended audiences?

8. Consider the following general content issues:

    - Include a summary of main findings and recommendations
    - Make information accessible. Shape your material so that it is accessible to different stakeholders, showing how it relates to their concerns, while remaining true to the perceptions and priorities of our research population
    - Be clear. Emphasise key findings for action
    - State which problems are common and which are serious
    - Provide solid evidence to support your views
    - Avoid too much detail
    - Identify key policy messages
    - Make recommendations practical.

Guideline 4



A viable dissemination strategy

Research dissemination is not a one-off event. Ideally it should involve initial announcements and awareness raising, interim and 'final' outputs plus possible further updates and evaluations of impact and uptake of the findings.

In order for a programme of dissemination to continue for the chosen duration, all associated costs should be itemised in the research proposal.

Taking advantage of existing networking initiatives can achieve a high and cost-effective level of information sharing with interested groups.

Ideally, any dissemination strategy should include plans for monitoring and evaluation (M & E) of these activities (see Guideline 5 below) as an important way of checking the effectiveness of existing practice and adapting future dissemination tasks accordingly.

Checklist 4

1. The following are some of the actions that can be used to contribute towards a viable dissemination strategy:

   - Continuing to publish in the area after the end of the project
   - Supporting change activities in the community, based upon the concluded research
   - Monitoring government and NGOs' progress on action points arising out of the project
   - Taking part in relevant national/international meetings
   - Holding meetings with key relevant stakeholders to review progress.

2. End-users can themselves achieve lasting improvements by influencing policy development. This can be done in several ways including:

   - Taking part in national meetings
   - Supporting work by other groups around issues that are of concern to the end-user group.

3. Identify appropriate national, regional, local and thematic networks, which can act as conduits for project output dissemination.

Guideline 5



Measuring your achievement

Despite the problems inherent in attempting to monitor and evaluate the impact of our dissemination activities, it is important that we do so, in order to build a body of knowledge about our information users and how to reach them successfully. We can then share this information within our own organisation, or with other interested networks.

Given the methodological difficulties of distinguishing between successful message uptake and the use of appropriate dissemination pathway, we should first pilot our chosen method to confirm that we know what it is we are measuring.

Proxy measures of dissemination effectiveness are often used and provide useful data. If we combine this with more direct measures of dissemination effectiveness in ways suggested by our participants, we will have a combined rich source of data.

Checklist 5

1. Data can be collected on the effectiveness of a dissemination strategy by asking the following questions:

   - Were the messages/materials produced?
   - Were they disseminated?
   - Did the target audience receive the messages?
   - If received, does the target audience remember the message?
   - If remembered, how were these messages used?

   Other considerations might be:

   - The strengths and weaknesses of the dissemination process (this should include negative results)
   - Outcomes which can be attributed to the dissemination process
   - Recommendations for change and modification to the dissemination process
   - The impact on target audiences
   - Variations in impact on audiences according to variables of the group, content, context, medium and information source
   - Recommendations for further action regarding the evaluation of impact of dissemination.

2. It is important that the timing of any M&E or tracking activity is correct. It is difficult to issue general guidelines, which can be widely applied. The researchers on a particular project are likely to be best placed to judge when this should occur, given their knowledge of the target audiences and the nature of the message delivered.

   Ensure that M&E activities are listed in the dissemination strategy at the beginning of any project. At this stage, dissemination objectives should be clearly defined and the different M&E processes should be timetabled. A range of both qualitative and quantitative indicators may be necessary to verify the demand for and supply of outputs and to identify the use made of disseminated materials.

3. The ways in which the results of the M&E will be used should also be agreed in the planning stages. The final documentation should be distributed to the group or should contribute to an organisational knowledge bank of M&E. These might then be used (outlined by Gosling and Edwards 1998):

   - To provide a discussion framework for the further development of work
   - To inform decisions about dissemination
   - To be the basis for broader dissemination strategies
   - To be a model for subsequent review and evaluation activities
   - To influence other collaborating organisations.

Further information



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Synthesis note compiled by Dr. Julie Fisher

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