Research Communication Strategy – Brief

Abstract from the "Guide to planning a communication strategy", link http://dfcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Guide-planning-a-communication-strategy-v2.pdf

Please observe that this is a very brief abstract prepared by the Research Unit of Danida Fellowship Centre (DFC) based on the Guide and serves merely as an introduction to the Guide and the research projects' work on strengthening/developing communication strategies.

### Research communication as dissemination *and* engagement

Research communication should not only be regarded as a one-way delivery of information in the form of *dissemination*, e.g. journal articles, books, policy briefs, information workshops, leaflets, video, etc. Much benefit could be gained from considering research communication also as engagement. *Engagement* increases the processes of interaction and participation, e.g. by consultation with intended users of booklets or leaflets, inviting feedback from test audiences. Stakeholder workshops are also useful for user groups to present their own ideas for solutions or testing solutions. Formal partnerships with organisations that have complementary interests (e.g. the private sector, NGOs/CBOs, policy, etc.) to that of researchers can, in addition, be very valuable to increase engagement.

Practical steps in planning a research communication strategy

The exercise of planning a research communication strategy should be done as a team study on white boards or large sheets of paper to help see/visualise the kinds of meetings and communication products could be beneficial. The steps are:

1) Line out what the project results are intended to influence or change;
2) Reflect on and note down the challenges in terms of communication and relation building that experience shows will need to be addressed;
3) Brainstorm and visualize your ideas for project meetings and communication products in relation to opportunities to increase engagement;
4) Plan the communication strategy for each component (dissemination and engagement) that result from the above brainstorming exercise.

The brainstorming/planning exercise could take a starting point as in Figure 6b considering engagement level over time.
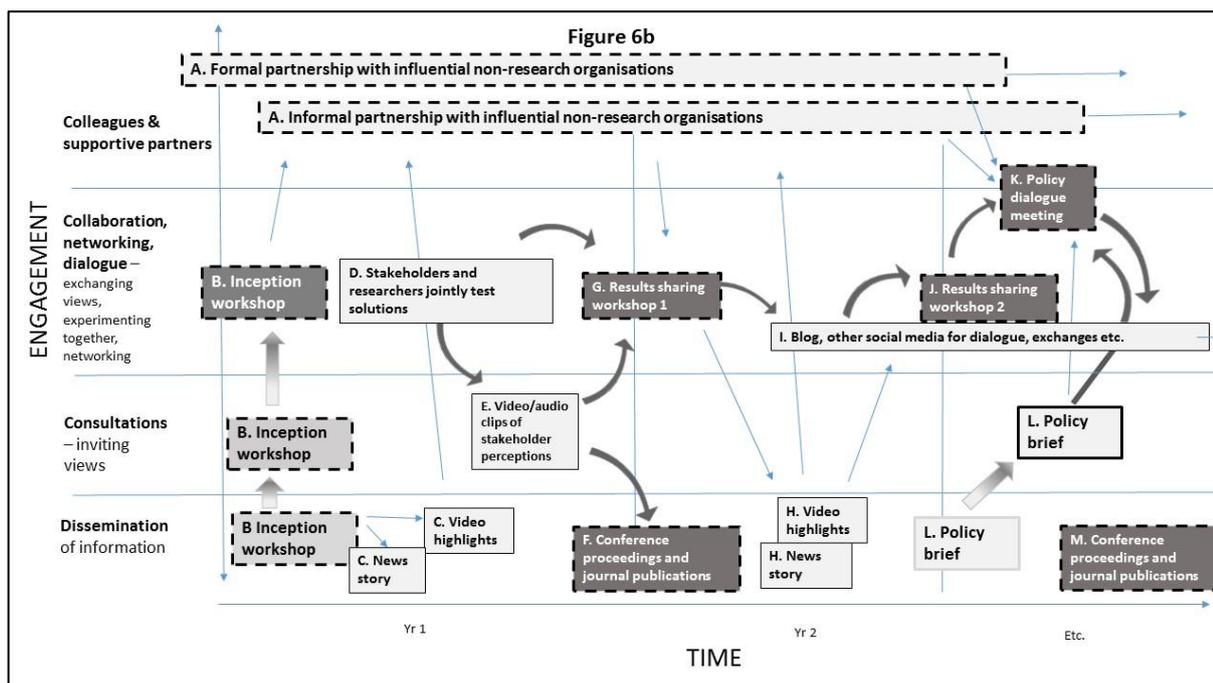
Figure 6b

Strategy planning frame

For any chosen communication product or process event, the communication strategy planning frame can help think through the steps from objectives all the way to allocating resources. The table (Figure 7) can be used to organize the planning and the columns are explained below the table.

Tool 2. A strategy planning frame	1. Passive role – one-way dissemination	2. Consultation– users giving views, feedback	3. Collaboration – dialogue, networking, exchanging and co-producing knowledge	4. Partnership– between key organisations, & researchers & non-researchers
Communication product or engagement event				
Anticipated outcome? (Objectives)				
What is needed? (Methods)				
When/how often? (Timing)				
How will results be tracked/measured? Indicators (M&E)				
Human & financial resources needed? (Implementation)				
Opportunities for synergies & interactions between categories 1-4?				

Figure 7

Column 1 of the planning frame - the passive role:
The passive role deals with what is normally called dissemination products and events– they tend to be one-way communication, and the receiver often has a passive role.
➢ There can be very good reasons for these kinds of products or events. These work well where the giver and the receiver of information share the same background, such as education, language, interests, way of looking at the world, etc.
➢ It is quite possible to split up this column: You can put *research articles, reports, conferences* etc., in their own column because they are produced using different methods and have different objectives than *dissemination products* (leaflets, booklets, videos etc.) aimed at other stakeholders.

Column 2 of the planning frame - consultation:
Consultation is about the *process* of consulting, i.e. researchers asking for feedback, seeking stakeholders' views, etc.
➢ Only include products here if consultation with samples of intended end users (in the form of pre-test) will be actively used to improve the quality of a leaflet or booklet etc. as a source of understandable information for those particular stakeholders.
➢ Typical events/activities that may fit here include *inception workshops*, *interviews with stakeholders* to gather information, *results sharing workshops*, use of *social media* for stakeholders to give their views, e.g. a *chat group, a blog*.

Column 3 of the planning frame - collaboration:
Collaboration goes further than 'consultation' to include multiway communication/dialogue among stakeholders (including to and from researchers).
➢ It is about the *process* of collaborating, not about products: however, various products may be used i) *to support collaboration* and ii) as *result from collaboration*.
➢ If specific communication products or facilities *support* collaboration, they are methods. E.g. a blog can be a way to encourage stakeholders to discuss issues with each other, but the blog is a method.

➢ If specific products *result* from collaboration (e.g. maybe information for a TV news item, or a fact sheet), which can be used to spread ideas or improve communication at other stages in the project process, then these are examples of synergy and new dissemination.

Column 4 of the planning frame - partnerships:
Partnerships may be formal, between research institutes and other organisations relevant to the work in question, all written into the project document as partners sharing funds and decision-making. Partnerships may also be informal, and emerge as a result from building relations with particular organisations. These latter kinds of relation may emerge with time and it could be worth keeping it in mind, even if you don't start by trying to activate such an informal partnership.

Illustration of entries into the table is available in the full version of the Guide.

General considerations and tips
It may not be possible to make all the changes or introduce all the communication measures at the same time due to resource limitations (time, staff, funds, etc.). A practical way forward is to decide on some *key areas where modifications to project communication plans or a new plan seem to be most critical* based on team reflection on objectives and challenges, on visualising actions and on available resources.

If, for example, it is decided to focus most efforts on developing consultations (for example to pre-test leaflets and booklets) and/or on collaboration and knowledge co-generating activities, then start using just those categories of the strategy planning frame to develop the ideas (objectives, outcomes, methods, etc.). In projects with many components (e.g. chemical analysis, technology development, business development), it is best to develop separate plans for each component for the sake of clarity and usefulness as working tools. Consider combining categories where this makes sense – i.e. if most meetings have a strong dual character (consultations and collaborations). You may still need to develop *individual protocols* based on the implementation steps in the planning frame for specific important communication products and meetings.

In very challenging cases, it may be necessary to divide the research communication strategy into *phases*: for example, an initial fact-finding phase based on *consultations* to understand the issues from the point of view of different key stakeholders; then a more *collaboration*-based phase where an initial set of stakeholders agree to meetings to debate results from research (from the consultation phase, and other inputs) and consider how these contribute to their own roles in looking for a solution to the development challenge in question.

Research teams themselves may not have all the skills needed. See whether it is possible to bring in media professionals and skilled moderators or facilitators (for managing key meetings) where needed. Can students assist with tracking and documenting the effects of the communication measures? Expose collaborating journalists, extension service staff and others to the details of technical topics through e.g. field and laboratory visits. Information materials made by others should also be pretested. As teams proceed in practice, the capacity and confidence to plan effectively for, implement, and learn from combining engagement and dissemination activities in joint communication strategies will quickly grow.

/ DFC, Sept 2016