

MARCH 2011

OVERVIEW

IIED Communications Team

Project name:

Communications Learning Week

Project leader:

Liz Carlile

Time frame:

7–11 February 2011

Cost:

£23,000

Objective:

To strengthen and stimulate improved communication by both IIED staff and partners by sharing our combined expertise and learning about key communication challenges in a range of countries and sectors.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Effective and targeted communications are essential for encouraging research uptake, influencing policy and promoting good governance. This project brought nine people from our partner organisations in Guatemala, Lao PDR, Liberia, Malawi, Nepal, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda to spend a week in London with nine IIED communications staff members, sharing expertise on what makes good research communication and experience in tackling communications challenges. Participants presented and reviewed case studies, exchanged knowledge about writing for policymakers and working with the media, developed communication strategies, discussed appropriate marketing techniques and tools, and explored a range of publishing media, including print, online, film and social networks.

THEORY OF CHANGE

People take action when they feel empowered to do so. In terms of policy change and decision-making for sustainable development, they will feel empowered when they have robust evidence that gives them confidence, context-relevant information that supports their own situation, and an

Cross-cultural insights into communication

A gathering of IIED communicators and partners shared diverse experiences of what it takes to spur policymakers to action.

Somewhere in the developing world, a research institute's latest report lands in the email inbox of a government official. The paper's aim is to alter the course of public policy. Will the official examine it in detail – or will an assistant skim-read it on their behalf? Is it too lengthy for the harried reader to take in, or does it catch her attention by highlighting the practical problem she's been wrestling with all month? Will a decision maker nod at the concerns raised and bury the report in a growing pile, or will the report fire up a whole team to take specific, realistic steps?

Crafting a message that will truly influence policy requires savvy attention to the audience. Researchers, whose careers depend on claiming a niche among experts, may lack incentives to develop lobbying skills and master plain, punchy writing. And communications officers on tiny budgets may feel forced to choose a generic approach, with a small number of publications aimed at a broad readership, instead of tailoring messages to key individuals or groups.

Yet increasingly top donors such as the UK's Department for International Development are demanding that these organisations develop more detailed research uptake strategies that should take up 10–30% of the overall budget. Groups facing the new requirements are seeking more sophisticated strategies for reaching decision makers.

These rising ambitions fuelled Communications Learning Week, a

meeting of the IIED communications team and nine researchers, communicators, advocates and project managers from partner organisations in the developing world. "I've been doing lots of good work at home but how to communicate what I do to the public and local community has been a constraint to me," said Salome Gongloe Gofan from the Rural Integrated Centre for Community Empowerment in Liberia. The participants gathered to share experiences and learn from one another about how to become more capable communicators.

Context is king

The week covered themed sessions on the full range of communication topics, including crafting a communication strategy, writing for policymakers, working with the media, exploiting new technologies such as social media and participatory video, marketing publications and monitoring results.

Early in the week, the partners presented specific communications challenges they'd been working on at home. It quickly became clear that everyone in the workshop was dealing with different circumstances and cultural contexts. In the partners' nine countries, the basic goal of influencing policymakers would guide them down nine distinct pathways. Some were subject to strict conventions about how to present information; all encountered unique decision-making processes and

understanding of the practical realities facing their constituents and other people they are trying to support. Communicating research in a way that delivers on all these counts is challenging and requires a context-specific approach. Sharing experience of what works across different countries and sectors offers one way of improving both our and our partners' communications to maximise impact and influence in policymaking arenas.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- Understanding the cultural environment is critical for maximising the power of communication.
- Taking time to delineate a more detailed communication strategy will increase cost effectiveness and lead to better results.
- IIED needs to strengthen the way it communicates – particularly in being strategic and targeting writing to specific audiences – and share experience through more learning activities.

PARTNERS' VIEW

It has been an excellent training week and very valuable to our work here in Laos, especially when it comes to communicating to decision makers and how to best present information and evidence of research in the policy dialogue. The IIED communications team is very professional and all the participants learnt a lot from them as well as from each other.

Silvia Jundt
Poverty-Environment Initiative, Lao PDR

IIED COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

The Communications team works to raise the profile of links between the environment and development among policymakers, academics, the media, the private sector and the general public to improve research uptake, encourage more accurate reporting, influence policy and support good governance and democracy.



Participants worked together and shared ideas in a series of practical workshops.

institutions. Their communications had to be culturally specific, in addition to emphasising how the research was relevant to a given region or sector.

By providing both the space to present individual challenges and a series of practical writeshops to work on real content, the workshop allowed participants to tackle these different contexts and ground the discussions in reality. “I was really able to troubleshoot and workshop my own issues ... and make a lot of progress – not just talk in theory about things,” said Jessie Davie from the Tanzania Natural Resource Forum. Neila Bobb-Prescott from the Caribbean Natural Resource Institute added that “the handouts with additional pointers to other resources are extremely useful – they give you an opportunity to go back to your place of work and build your capacity”.

Another important takeaway concerned communication strategy. Through strategic planning exercises, participants explored the potential benefits of precisely defining target audiences, shrewdly choosing when and how to contact them, and customising their messages. As with any planning process, early and detailed work in this area improves efficiency and impact by clarifying who will act, on what timeline, what outcomes are expected and how to measure them. “The discussion on communication strategy was very useful for my current job and helped me a lot to develop my own strategy,” said Silvia Jundt from PEI Lao Programme.

Learning from peers

Although IIED staff organised the meeting and prepared presentations, we didn't adopt the role of teachers and trainers. Everyone in the workshop had valuable knowledge and experience to share and the participants learnt much from each other. Jessie Davies explained the value of such peer-to-peer learning: “it was wonderful to hear from people with similar struggles as me such as bureaucracies, politics and trouble with internet connections... but it was even more positive to hear how people overcome these challenges and I feel that I learnt a lot from my peers.” Similarly, George Grant Matiya from the University of Malawi said “I have learnt a lot from my fellow participants and enjoyed being able to share experiences from different corners of the world”.

Our own team too learnt a lot from the participants and we are taking on board a number of insights from the sessions, including reworking our briefings' design based on feedback we received, repurposing materials created for the workshop to train our own researchers, and incorporating information gleaned into new communications pages and a policy portal being developed for IIED's website.

The International Institute for Environment and Development's Reflect & act series showcases innovation and lessons learnt in selected projects from across the institute. See www.iied.org for more.