



Spreading the word – a key component of research

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How can research results about water and sanitation be usefully communicated to different user groups? This article describes guidelines for helping researchers determine who their work can benefit and how they can best get their message across.

In the past 20 years or so, a better understanding has developed of the importance of getting research findings in the water and sanitation sector out to those who stand to benefit from them. This conceptual change, which links knowledge sharing to achieving its aims of international development and poverty elimination by, for example, awareness-raising among policy makers, has been supported by agencies such as the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DFID).¹ These concerns were highlighted recently at the Sixth Water Information Summit,² which focused on strategies to overcome the ‘digital divide’ between the North and South and on sharing knowledge and information to support the management of the water and sanitation sector.

So what does this mean for the WAT-SAN researcher? Does he or she now also need to be an expert in information management and dissemination? The Spreading the Word project³ investigated what researchers need to consider and has produced a set of guidelines to assist them. These guidelines are meant to be just that – a guide – rather than a prescriptive formula for dissemination, as it is recognized that the context of each research project can vary widely, and that different approaches to the dissemination of findings may therefore be needed. Further information and detailed checklists for action are also provided in the recent publication *Spreading the Word Further*.⁴

The Spreading the Word project

The Spreading the Word project was conceived with the aim of improving the

impact of DFID-funded water and sanitation research, by identifying and comparing appropriate ways to disseminate information about research projects.

The data for this project came from in-depth consultation with agencies working in South Africa, Colombia and Bangladesh, which act both as recipients and disseminators of information related to water and sanitation.

A strategy for dissemination

The institutions involved in the study varied in the extent to which they employed a formal strategy for dissemination. They did all recognize, however, that dissemination was an important element of the work they did, with intentions to develop strategies where none existed. A standard approach to dissemination, with generic, comprehensive principles applied across the institution was preferred, with the flexibility to be adapted to the needs of particular projects, departments and target audience (see Guideline one). Those institutions that had developed strategies emphasized the importance of involving all those who had relevant experience of dissemination within the organization.

Final decisions about dissemination should involve those closest to the project and include all levels of stakeholder, including beneficiaries where possible. If the project design is based on demand-responsive principles, and target audience participation has been a factor at each stage of the research, then this is guaranteed. In reality, however, there are still many projects that have not benefited from this approach, and dissemination is then an add-on at the end of the project. For these projects, and in order to disseminate

findings of past projects that are still useful, these guidelines lead the researcher through the process. It is also important to consider that research findings may have relevance to a wider audience, geographically and according to target group, than initially envisaged.

Target audiences

The organizations consulted were targeting a wide range of audiences, from national government personnel to local farmers. It is important to develop an in-depth understanding of target audiences, in consultation with end-users and, more frequently, with those acting as intermediaries for them. This understanding should include relevant socio-cultural and resource factors that could influence the type of information sent and how to get it to them (see Guideline two). Traditional dissemination channels were important, as shown by the PROKASH project in Bangladesh, which targets women as the main proponents of change in the behaviour of family members. Face-to-face meetings are more useful in this instance than written materials.



Funding is not always available for resource centres such as this one: SEUF, in Kerala, India

Additional issues are language, level of detailed content, the relevance of information to local concerns and demands, whether audiences have the resources to make use of the information (e.g. does a workbook require scissors?) and is it being sent in the best way (e.g. do the recipients of online materials have reliable network connections?)

Dissemination pathways

A large number of dissemination pathways or methods were suggested by participants, reflecting their experience and good practice (see Guideline three). To decision-making-level audiences, dissemination is best through written materials from fax to posters and books. Journal publication is key to the scientific and research community, although those in low-income countries are unlikely to enjoy the same access to these resources as in the North. Reaching practitioner level involves a range of training and participatory methods, sector journals and newsletters. Community-level audiences and beneficiaries are targeted via education, entertainment and traditional methods (e.g. folk theatre), use of the media and face-to-face interaction.

Viability issues

The Southern agencies which were consulted experienced many barriers to effective dissemination, including a lack of understanding of the processes and audience needs, as well as organizational, racial and regional barriers. However, the most commonly reported negative factor is a lack of sufficient funding to implement and complete dissemination activities (see Guideline four). Effective networking is a partial and cost-effective solution to some of these problems, with examples of best practice such as the CALDAS network launched by the Columbian Institute for Science and Technology Development (COLCIENCIAS, see Box 1).⁵ This links scientists, researchers and students through thematic networks and email discussion lists.

Monitoring and evaluation

Measuring the impact of dissemination is difficult.^{6,7} Nevertheless, several

Box 1. Guidelines for research dissemination

Guideline one: adopt a strategic approach to dissemination

- A strategic rather than an *ad hoc* approach to dissemination is preferable. An organizational strategy offers more than lots of individual strategies through sharing experience of reaching target audiences.
- A standardized institutional approach, where relevant, needs to be flexible enough to allow for any specific circumstances (outputs, target audience needs and resources related to each project).

Guideline two: knowing your target audience

- The target audience is made up of the groups of key organizations that you want to influence and on whom you want your research to impact.
- An important factor in determining who the target groups should be is the subject of the research itself, which will suggest audiences and their locations. The extent to which the research focuses on practical applications in the field, on organizational issues or has state-level policy implications also influences the selection of target groups and the types of output delivered.
- Once identified it is important to discover how information is received and used by target groups and any specific factors that might affect this.

Guideline three: hitting the target

- Using several dissemination methods is most likely to hit the identified audience.
- In order to reach a wide general audience consider the mass media. However, first check how it is used in any location and what it is and is not effective for.
- Use of information communication technologies (ICTs) and electronic media depends on the level of resources required.
- Consider the use of less traditional dissemination methods used by in-country agencies and be creative.
- Infomediaries (those who can have an intermediary role in distributing information) are important. They have knowledge about local information requirements, and their perceived standing with target groups can provide the entry point that may evade the researcher.

Guideline four: 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 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 itemized 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 of these activities as an important way of checking the effectiveness of existing practice and adapting future dissemination.

Guideline five: measuring your achievement

- Despite the problems inherent in attempting to monitor and evaluate the impact of dissemination activities, this is important in order to build a body of knowledge about information users and best ways to reach them.
- Given the methodological difficulties of distinguishing between successful message uptake and the use of appropriate dissemination pathways, we should first pilot our chosen method to confirm what it is we are measuring.
- Proxy measures of dissemination effectiveness are often used to provide useful data that arguably reflect success. An analysis of the impact and uptake of research can tell us something about whether we are getting dissemination right.

organizations in the study were making attempts at monitoring and evaluating their dissemination, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Examples of best practice include: questionnaires sent with the Mvula Trust⁸ diary, focusing on usefulness, design and layout; using PHAST (Participatory Hygiene and Sanitation

Transformation) and other participatory tools in the development of materials with communities; and constant user-needs assessment and focused discussion.

Indicators of successful dissemination (other than measures of, for example, numbers of books distributed) show how easily users receive the



Face-to-face meetings are often more effective for communicating at the community level

Box 2. The Caldas network

Established in 1992 by the Colombian Institute for Science and Technology Development, COLCIENCIAS, the aim of the Caldas network project was to provide a means of exchanging scientific and technological knowledge by Colombian researchers and the wider international scientific community. Initially, its impact was limited by a lack of thematic structure and the need to focus on local research problems. Further restructuring in 2002 along thematic lines addressed these problems.

Objectives

The objectives of the Caldas network are:

- to be a communication system promoting and facilitating interaction for knowledge promotion and appropriation via a virtual community
- to use groupings around four strategic themes: environment and development; territory, region and city; science, technology and society; and communication and culture
- to facilitate information exchange amongst those working in Colombia and those abroad.

Tools

The network makes use of the latest ICTs, using interactive tools such as electronic mailing lists, real-time virtual discussions, and other virtual discussion forums (not real time) in which questions are posed and debates initiated and developed over time. Amongst its activities are the development of databases of specialist personnel, training initiatives and the joint development of areas of mutual research interest. Other important features are the distribution of electronic publications, sharing documentation amongst different institutions, promoting participation by information end-users and facilitating research capacity in smaller institutions through the support of larger centres of excellence.

Success and lessons learned

One measurement of Caldas' success is its continually growing membership of approximately 300 users linked to research in Columbia and countries such as Germany, USA, Canada and Brazil. All users are registered to one of the four thematic areas.

Some of the lessons learned by Caldas are that thematically structured information is the most effective method of meeting the needs of the scientific community. A focus on discussion papers developed according to the thematic axes allows a more constructive debate and results in greater participation by researchers. This includes national experts within Colombia and those from the international research arena, giving Colombian experience an international voice and ensuring that local research problems benefit from an international perspective.

information and whether the format and content meet their needs (see Guideline five). What is known about the degree of uptake of the message disseminated and its impact can act as proxy measures of dissemination success, given that effective communication must precede uptake.

Conclusions

Many experienced researchers will have a sound grasp of who their research is aimed at and the best ways to reach them. But for those who are less experienced or who have never considered the importance of dissemination as a key component of research, the guidelines should provide a detailed 'how-to' from planning stage to the end of the project and beyond. It is intended that dissemination should be regarded as an organizational issue, wherever possible, and that the actions suggested be implemented at an institutional level. For those who do not have organizational support, the guidelines should provide assistance to individual researchers.

About the author

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