SYNTHESIS NOTE

WEDC

Spreading the word

Disseminating research findings

Why is dissemination important?

- Dissemination activities are now widely acknowledged and given priority by national and international development programmes as an essential means of maximising the impact of research on development
- Dissemination is an intrinsic element of all good research practice, whatever the discipline
- Information and knowledge has a tendency to stay where it is generated. Dissemination prevents knowledge becoming 'sticky' and effectively lost
- Dissemination provides added value to research projects, as the impact of research can be potentially wider than the original focus
- Dissemination promotes the profile of the organisation and strengthens its research capacity

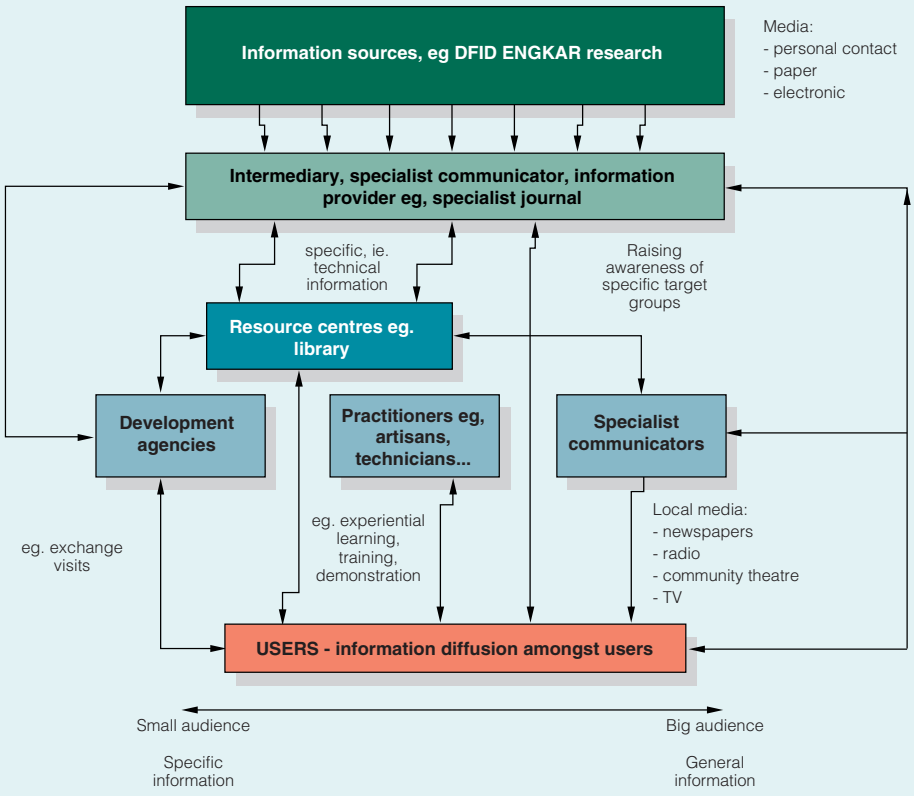
What do we mean by research dissemination?

Dissemination is the process of sharing information and knowledge. The challenge of dissemination is to improve the accessibility of research findings to those we are trying to reach. This means, firstly, to ensure the physical availability of research materials to as large a proportion of the target audience as possible, and secondly, to make research findings comprehensible to those who receive them.

DFID
Sponsored by the Department for International Development

Information and knowledge transfer

The conventional model of knowledge transfer is linear. Information is seen to flow from the information provider, via the chosen media, to the information user. This model assumes that dissemination is a one-way, top-down flow of information from the 'experts' to a passive audience. In reality, information flow is a far more complex process; it is an interactive, multi-directional exchange of knowledge and ideas that should be reflected in research dissemination strategies.



Information flow model (after ITDG)

What are the barriers to effective dissemination?

There may be barriers that prevent researchers from disseminating their work and there may be barriers that prevent research findings from reaching their potential audience in a usable form:

- **Institutional priorities** may dictate that the results of research are used only for internal consumption, with no priority being given by management to wider dissemination. Once distributed, research outputs may be stored rather than put to use as training resources or discussion materials
- **Practical difficulties** may act as disincentives to researchers. These may include tasks such as invoicing, and the need to produce research outputs in alternative formats. Time constraints may be an additional constraint to dissemination activities, especially if competing against the production of academic research papers, which have greater perceived intellectual credibility.
- For the users of information, there may be **technical and infrastructural barriers** to accessing information. For instance, Internet access may not be an option for all or connections may be unreliable or slow. Social and cultural barriers also have an effect and demand that disseminated findings are presented in appropriate formats, of the right length, style, content and language.
- Researchers may be **anxious about critical peer review**, as wider dissemination results in greater exposure of their work.

What do we need to consider when planning a dissemination strategy?

- **Information users**
  What information do they need and does its content have local relevance?

  Do they have the resources to receive and use the information?

  What is the most appropriate and effective information format and dissemination method?
- **Information source**
  Do users perceive the source to be competent, experienced and trustworthy?

  Is the source sufficiently oriented to dissemination and knowledge use?
- **Information content**
  Is the content comprehensible (clear and unambiguous) to users and written in a language they can understand?
- **Information medium**
  Is the information medium one that can be easily accessed by users?

  Are there more effective media that might improve accessibility and comprehension?

How to choose an appropriate dissemination pathway

There is some debate about the relative advantages of different dissemination pathways or methods. The traditional way of communicating academic research findings is through refereed journal articles. However, these are unlikely to reach a broad-based or non-technical target audience. Decisions about appropriate dissemination pathways should be informed by what is known about the users, source, content and medium. A general principle is that optimum dissemination is achieved through using a wide variety of pathways, from traditional and face-to-face communication methods, to the use of ICTs, in order to cover the range of user needs (e.g. of policy makers, practitioners and the research community).

Urban Waste Expertise programme (UWEP)

UWEP aims to supply target groups with relevant information about urban waste management and the related role of small and micro-enterprises. Messages disseminated vary according to the characteristics and needs of different groups, for instance, facts and figures may be more relevant for local authorities, whereas NGOs might need more practical advice on the application of research findings. UWEP reports that the use of mixed media and repetition of the message maximises the effectiveness of dissemination.

MANAGE - The Role of Communities in the Management of Improved Rural Water Supplies in Developing Countries

This project aims to improve water management by rural communities. Dissemination is viewed as a critical ongoing activity involving a dialogue with all project partners. Key dissemination mechanisms include: audio-visual materials; publications; electronic networking; training activities; information focal points and IRC participation in selected countries.

Relative merits of different dissemination pathways

Pathway	Advantage/s	Disadvantage/s
Working documents	■ target research findings to particular groups	■ limited audience
Research reports	■ single reference point for all aspects of the research	■ limited audience
Academic, refereed journal	■ wide impact on intellectual networks	■ limited audience
Professional journal	■ practitioner oriented audience	■ lacks academic rigour
Conference, workshop, seminar	■ learning and networking of professionals	■ expense
Training manual	■ applied knowledge	■ limited audience ■ expense
Networking	■ reaches members who share common research interests. ■ interaction, discussion and review of findings	■ low *active* participation ■ strong incentives needed for participation ■ time consuming to manage
Internet, e-mail	■ immediate, convenient ■ wide interest in electronic media	■ limited access in South ■ underdeveloped potential ■ expense
Intermediaries	■ research based on local norms	■ different agendas of intermediaries and project
Popularisation/ mass media	■ reaches wide audience ■ bottom up influence	■ diluted core message
Participatory techniques	■ practical guidance at community level	■ time consuming

Lessons learned

1. Dissemination should be a key element of any research, and requires adequate funding for it to be carried out effectively both during and beyond the lifetime of the project.
2. A dissemination strategy should include a clear statement of the rationale for dissemination, and how it relates to the research objectives.
3. A key element of dissemination planning should be the identification of potential target audiences.
4. Identify and assess users' information needs. These depend on user status and role (whether they are national/local government officials, sector professionals, community representatives or the poor), and the likely impact of relevant social and cultural factors. Broadly, if information is to be comprehensible, the content, language and written style should be clear, unambiguous and accessible.
5. It is important to have some understanding of the ways in which target audiences receive information. These may be the most appropriate means of disseminating research findings but alternative and less traditional ways of transferring information should also be considered. It is important to use a variety of dissemination methods when communicating research, linked closely to user information needs. Equal priority should be given to each type of output and the users it is intended to reach.
6. The timing of any dissemination activity should be carefully planned to maximise its impact. A staggered approach, to dissemination with the release of different types and levels of information (such as interim reports) to coincide with the various stages of the project cycle, is likely to have much greater impact than a single end of project report.
7. A dissemination strategy should include intended methods of monitoring and measuring the impact of dissemination.

This note presents a synthesis of the interim findings from 'Spreading the Word: Practical Guidelines for Research Dissemination Strategies'. This facilitates an initial analysis of common research dissemination strategies used, problems and constraints experienced, and factors that aid effective dissemination. The guidelines provided are aimed at research contractors and DFID involved in the dissemination of research findings.

Sponsored by the Department for International Development (DFID), UK

This document is an output from Phase One of a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

Synthesis note compiled by Julie Woodfield of WEDC.

THE QUEEN'S ANNIVERSARY PRIZES
FOR HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION

1998

'for outstanding service to developing countries'

water supply
■
sanitation
■
urban infrastructure
■
rural development
■
environmental management
■
institutional development

For further information, contact:

Darren Saywell, Andrew Cotton or Julie Woodfield
Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC)
Loughborough University
Leicestershire LE11 3TU UK

Email: D.L.Saywell@lboro.ac.uk
A.P.Cotton@lboro.ac.uk
J.Woodfield@lboro.ac.uk
Phone: 0 (44) 1509 222885
Fax: 0 (44) 1509 211079
Website: http://www.lboro.ac.uk/wedc/

WEDC

The Water, Engineering and Development Centre
is concerned with education, training, research and consultancy for the planning, provision and management of physical infrastructure for development in low- and middle-income countries.

SYNTHESIS NOTE

stw