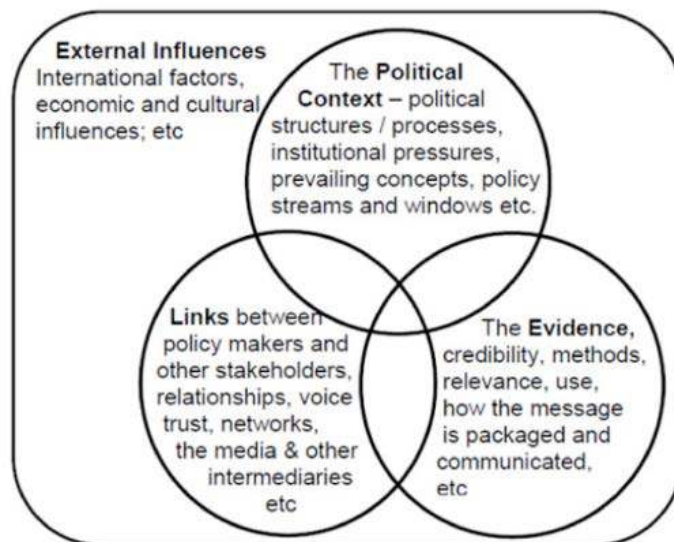# WHAT IS RESEARCH COMMUNICATION?

Main points

- Successful development calls for the conscious and active participation of the intended beneficiaries at every stage of the development process. Communication and participation can be seen as two sides of the same coin.
- Research to policy uptake benefits from the participation of stakeholders (researchers and policy makers) throughout the research process.
- The field of communication has always been part of international development practice and research. At IDRC, there is a commitment to support research that is relevant to policy makers, practitioners and researchers.
- Research communication is about making research relevant and known by policy-makers, practitioners and other researchers. This requires active listening, networking, and strategic dissemination mechanisms.
- Engaging stakeholders in the research process and sharing findings is part and parcel of the research strategy. The DECI-2 project team supports researchers and their partners in defining and improving their communication practice.
- An explicit communication strategy is useful to support engagement efforts, to allow for the exchange of ideas, and to choose effective channels to disseminate findings.
- DECI-2 is a research project in capacity development; we learn through practice by assisting research partners.

Background on Research Communication

Our practice is informed by the RAPID framework, which was developed by ODI in London[1]. It emphasizes three dimensions: **Evidence** signals the importance of packaging results and tailoring messages. **Links** underscores the importance of networking and of trustful relationships. The **Political Context** captures the complex nature of policy making with special attention on 'windows' or moments when policy makers are open to accessing evidence. The three dimensions are shaped by multiple **external influences**.

External Influences
International factors, economic and cultural influences; etc

The **Political Context** – political structures / processes, institutional pressures, prevailing concepts, policy streams and windows etc.

Links between policy makers and other stakeholders, relationships, voice trust, networks, the media & other intermediaries etc

The **Evidence**, credibility, methods, relevance, use, how the message is packaged and communicated, etc

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[1] http://www.odi.org.uk/programmes/rapid

Relevance to research projects

In our experience, most organizations and projects already implicitly work along these three dimensions:

- They produce materials (**evidence**),
- They network with many stakeholders on an ongoing basis (**links**), and
- They have observed and understood the **political context** and the teams know when and how to respond to windows of opportunity.
- Due to their understanding of their environment, they often take note of **external influences** and adjust their strategies accordingly.

What is at times lacking, however, is an explicit strategy to bring the three dimensions together in a targeted manner.

With DECI-2, we are attempting to help projects harness what they already do, make it explicit, and thereby make intentional strategic choices (for instance on methods & media) to maximize the outcomes of their research efforts.

The table below summarizes the three dimensions with suggestions on what to know, what to do, and how (adapted from Girard. B., & Acosta y Lara, 2012)

	What to know	**What to do**	**How**
Political context	Identify: the policy makers, their demands, the process, the timing	Network, find allies, monitor the process, use windows	Work with policy makers, align research with events, plan for windows
Evidence	Build on theory, use narrative, show evidence	Build credibility, find practical solutions, seek legitimacy, present options, package professionally	Demand high quality work, practice action-research, target communication activities
Links	Identify the stakeholders, the networks, the key intermediaries, and the alliances	Connect, be present, build coalitions, build new networks	Partner with stakeholders, link with intermediaries, seek informal contacts

Developing a research communication strategy

We are assisting partner projects to fine-tune their communication practice by:

- Understanding the nature of the issue(s);
- Mapping out who needs to be involved and verifying what each group already knows,
- Confirming each stakeholder groups' preferred communication channels, along with the times or places when they are best able to access and make sense of information;
- Documenting the different intentions or purposes of communication efforts and defining communication objectives;
- Working with affordable, accessible, and tested methods and media;
- Pretesting materials before dissemination;
- Determining a reasonable set of outputs and outcomes;
- Implementing, monitoring (a selection of outputs) and evaluating a selection of outcomes; and
- Reflecting on the experience to instill a 'communication way of thinking' into the project and organization.

What this means to your project

The DECI-2 team aims to create a communication capacity within projects and partner organizations. Our commitment is to support projects to describe how they design their communication activities, be it to enhance engagement, to network, to disseminate, and influence policy. The evidence of our 'service' will be noticed when:

- Research **projects** are able to engage their partners early on;
- Research **objectives and methods** are meaningful and understood by policy groups, by practitioners and by other researchers; and
- Research **findings** inform policy, practice and relevant development research.

Recommended readings

Girard. B., & Acosta y Lara, E. (eds), 2012. *Impact 2.0: New mechanisms for linking research and policy*. Montevideo: Fundación Comunica.

ODI (n.d.) *The RAPID Framework for Assessing Research-Policy Links.* Research and Policy in Development. London: ODI. http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/2764.pdf

Quarry, W. & Ramírez, R., 2009. *Communication for another development: Listening before telling*. London: Zed Books.

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