Making Research Findings *Actionable*

A quick reference to communicating health information for decision-making

Different stakeholders need different information, in different languages, using different terminology, delivered in formats that respect culture and norms.
Source: Ulin, Robinson & Tolley, 2005

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Around the world, individuals, organizations and governments routinely make decisions that influence the health and well-being of their communities. In addition, health researchers collect a wide variety of data about populations in need, actual services provided, and the resources needed to provide health services. Stakeholders, however, often make policy, advocacy, planning and programmatic decisions in the absence of relevant and useful information, actions that limit the effectiveness of health systems.

A growing body of literature demonstrates stakeholders' limited use of health information for decision-making partly due to a communication gap (Hennink & Stephenson, 2005; Ikamari, Adewuyi & Akinlo, 2007; Nath, 2007; Pope & Counahan, 2005; Wilkins, Nsubuga, Mendlein, Mercer & Pappaioanou, 2008). For example, information is not always disseminated or available to all of the stakeholders who need to be informed. When information is not presented using a method or format appropriate for a particular audience, it is deemed inaccessible and not used for decision-making. Few stakeholders have a background in statistics or research methods; therefore, research findings and other data presented using technical jargon can be too scientific and difficult to understand.

Different stakeholders have different information needs because they make different types of decisions. The information communicated to stakeholders must address their needs and concerns. In addition, information disseminated to stakeholders should emphasize key findings for action and include recommendations that are useful. In general, improving stakeholders' use of health information requires that it is *available, accessible, relevant, and useful*. The goal of this document is to provide a quick reference of suggested communication approaches for health researchers and M&E professionals in order to facilitate stakeholders' use of health information for decision-making. The information presented in this document has been synthesized from a number of references and resources listed in the end of this document.

DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

How health information is communicated should be considered during the research planning phase rather than immediately prior to dissemination of results. This approach will allow project coordinators to include a communication strategy in the project proposal, and to allocate appropriate staff and financial resources for the communication activities. From the beginning of your project, consider how you plan to communicate the research objectives and results.

Four Essential Questions

1. What are the objectives of the communication strategy?
2. Who are the target audiences?
3. What are appropriate channels of communication?
4. How will you assess information use?

When developing a communication strategy, start by asking four essential questions. These questions address the essential elements of an effective communication strategy. The goals and type of a research project may warrant considering additional elements discussed in other resources (Management Sciences for Health, 1999; Campbell, Schryer-Roy & Jessani, 2008; Pisani, 2004).

1. What are the objectives of the communication strategy?

Essentially, we want stakeholders to use the information for decision-making. Although this is the goal, remember that different stakeholders have different information needs because they make decisions at both policy and program levels. As such, multiple research questions are often included in a study, which in turn results in a variety of communication objectives. The next step in the communication strategy is to align the study objectives with the appropriate target audiences.

2. Who are the target audiences?

Research findings are generally disseminated to several different audiences. But how do we know which audiences to include in our strategy? The following questions can guide which stakeholders to target for information dissemination (Foreit, Moreland & LaFond, 2006):

- Who will benefit from the data, and what questions are they seeking to answer?
- Who has influence and resources that can support this project?
- Who needs to be targeted to get the data into action?
- Who will be directly or indirectly affected by the outcome of this initiative?
- Who will support our plan? Who will oppose it? Why? How do we deal with it?
- How can we best leverage their insights or assuage their objections?

Universal Content Guidance

1. clear
2. concise
3. practical
4. actionable

An effective stakeholder analysis answers these questions in a way that significantly improves a project's design and the real-world value of the results. The stakeholder analysis typically results in a list of target audiences. After identifying the target audiences, project planners need to identify the appropriate formats and channels to convey their research findings.

3. What are appropriate channels of communication?

A research study frequently generates several results, all of which may not be relevant to each stakeholder. Generally, key messages and the channels used to communicate them should be tailored to suit different audiences so the information is available, accessible, relevant, and useful. An adequate understanding of the way stakeholders use information drives which messages to convey while the choice of communication methods and formats depends on how audiences prefer to receive information and their educational level.

Regardless of which communication methods and formats are employed, an effective strategy should aim to disseminate actionable findings using plain (non-academic) language, in a culturally appropriate, user-friendly format. The next section reviews the ways in which target audiences often use information and the communication methods and formats commonly employed to convey research. The types of decision-making and communication channels are not exclusive to any one stakeholder group.

Politicians and government officials use research findings to make decisions regarding policies, resource allocation, and strategic planning. For example, information produced from district mortality surveillance data in Tanzania was used by health officers to give malaria prominence within district health plans consistent with its disease burden. In addition, data from the surveillance system showed that a high number of malaria deaths occurred outside of the health sector, which prompted officials to make substantial investments in promoting insecticide-treated bed nets.

Government sector officials have limited time and expertise to read detailed research reports; therefore, researchers often disseminate information to them in the form of policy briefs, brochures, and executive summaries that highlight actionable recommendations for decision-making. Policy-makers sometimes seek information from government agencies and research organizations suggesting that making research available on public Web sites will increase its uptake. Face-to-face meetings with policy-makers provide direct access to decision-makers, although reaching them may be difficult. Examples of such meetings include forums where senior policy-makers convey key research messages, and dissemination workshops where policy-makers

Communication Case Study

The government of Kenya conducted a secondary analysis of the 2003 Demographic and Health Survey data set to inform efforts to reposition family planning as a key issue for national development strategies. Two objectives of the study, and thus the communication plan, were to provide evidence that would be used 1) to guide policy-makers' drafting of a national reproductive health policy, and 2) to raise the public profile of contraceptive prevalence and fertility issues.

Nearly 100 representatives across several sectors were identified as stakeholders, including, but not limited to, government officials, program staff, NGOs, donors, professional associations, community and religious leaders, journalists, the general public, and researchers/academics. The media were included in the dissemination plan because of their influence and resources in being able to raise the public profile of contraceptive prevalence and fertility issues.

The government understood that women could use the findings from the secondary analysis to inform their decisions about contraceptive use. In addition, the information was disseminated through the mass media due to women's expressed trust in this communication method.

One of the communication objectives was to raise the public profile of contraceptive prevalence and fertility issues. Following the media outreach efforts, the project coordinators interviewed stakeholders from civil society groups and found that the media coverage reinvigorated public discussion around family planning issues, which in turn increased the membership base of these organizations.

and program managers use the findings to develop action plans or draft national strategic plans.

Program managers employed by public agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) frequently use research information for decisions, including program design, planning, improvement, management, and operations. For example, a program director in northern Uganda routinely reviews clinics' utilization statistics and financial reports to assess whether the amount of funding allocated to different program areas is sufficient relative to the number of patients.

Program managers' roles within the health system drive their preference for how information is presented to them. Program managers at the district level or below are likely to find a detailed report with site-specific information more useful than an executive summary. Surveillance data and service statistics are collected on a continuous basis and could be packaged as a monthly or quarterly report for ease of use. Scheduling regular meetings with program managers allows researchers to provide summary reports systemically and to highlight information across different areas such as finance, inventory, and service delivery. Primary research results are also of interest to this group of stakeholders, who may find an executive summary with key programmatic findings practical. Audiovisual presentations with charts and graphs are usually very effective methods of disseminating information succinctly.

Civil society, nongovernmental organizations and professional associations often use evidence-based research to advocate for specific policies, programs, or issues. For example, researchers in Sudan disseminated the results of a baseline survey that showed a high prevalence of unsafe abortion. The local women's groups used the information to initiate a dialogue with policy-makers about the negative health consequences of unsafe abortion and the need for post-abortion care services. A nurses' association in southern Africa used the findings from a study assessing post-rape interventions to develop a position statement supporting the use of antibiotics to prevent sexually transmitted infections.

The stakeholders in this group use action-oriented research, yet they do not commonly use research terminology. Communication activities with these groups tend to focus on conveying succinct research findings and recommendations presented in culturally-sensitive, community-specific language. For example, researchers can develop a fact sheet for religious leaders to issue a public statement supporting the use of family planning. Brochures and other handouts are also frequently used to communicate research to community-based and professional groups. Consulting community leaders prior to developing materials

Tips for Writing a Press Release

- Make it short (one page) and use simple, non-academic language.
- Follow the format of a news story.
- The headline should contain keywords and catch the reader's attention.
- The first paragraph should address the 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'why' questions.
- Write in the third person.
- Use short sentences.
- Use active verbs and avoid passive voice.

Tips for an Effective Policy Brief

- Identify a problem, propose a solution and present a compelling recommendation.
- Use a professional vs. academic tone.
- Ground the argument in the evidence.
- Make it interesting by using images, quotes, photographs, boxes, etc.
- Make sure the recommendations are feasible.
- Consider providing supporting documents with the policy brief.
- The length depends on the intended audience (two to eight pages).

Tips for Developing a Brochure

- Readers should be able to understand the message at a glance.
- Colors, images, and effective typefaces add flavor.
- State the problem in terms of an objective.
- Review the background and rationale for the initative.
- Present research results and their implications.
- Include an overview of the research project/institution/team.
- Provide links to further sources of information.
- Provide contact information.

Source: Campbell et al., 2008

can help ensure use of appropriate language. Young women in some communities will quickly understand if a researcher refers to "marriage before the age of 15" rather than "early marriage." Presenting research findings to community-based groups requires creativity. Many non-researchers find it easier to understand a simple text than a table full of numbers. Having a two-person team present research may increase the audiences' confidence in the findings. A researcher can present the data while a colleague from an NGO raises questions about the data and helps to address the communities' concerns (Pisani, 2004).

Private-sector companies have been involved with efforts to address public health issues by developing prevention programs and care policies. Mining companies, for example, have used behavioral surveillance data to inform HIV/AIDS intervention strategies. Companies are profit-driven entities and research information showing how a public health epidemic can lead to a financial loss is likely to capture their attention. Private-sector firms have been receptive to presentations with clear recommendations about how they can be involved with work-place or community-based programs. If there is substantial political support for the issue, having a high-level politician co-present the information and make the case for private-sector involvement could be an effective method of delivering key messages.

Mass media, including television, radio, newspapers and magazines, are powerful communication tools with the potential of reaching a significant number of people. Many resources exist on this topic; we will cover key issues in this section. The media use research information to increase public awareness about health issues, to enable people to make evidence-based decisions about their own health and to generate support for policy initiatives.

The range of media outlets provides researchers with several communication options; yet in reality, the options may be limited by budget considerations and which audiences are being targeted. Some of the most common methods of disseminating research information through the media are building relationships with journalists, helping them to interpret and report data accurately, and issuing press releases. Working closely with journalists enables researchers to increase the likelihood that information is reported accurately. In turn, journalists may perceive the researcher as a reliable source of information and seek their "professional opinion" in the future. Inviting journalists to dissemination meetings is another approach to increasing opportunities for accurate news coverage.

Issuing press releases not only informs journalists about research and urges them to cover the story, but it also lays out the most

Suggested Communication Methods for Each Stakeholder Group

Politicians and government officials
- dissemination workshops
- face-to-face meetings
- policy forums
- policy briefs, brochures, and executive summaries
- public Web sites

Program managers
- monthly or quarterly reports
- summary reports
- executive summaries
- audiovisual presentations

Civil society, NGOs and professional associations
- fact sheets
- brochures and other handouts
- audiovisual presentations

Private-sector
- fact sheets
- audiovisual presentations

General public
- magazines
- newspapers
- press releases
- radio
- television
- Web-based media

Donors/funders
- full research report
- audiovisual presentation

Academic researchers and international agencies/organizations
- peer-reviewed article
- research databases
- oral and poster presentations
- CD-ROM
- Web sites

important findings the researcher wishses to convey. If possible, connect the press release to a dissemination meeting, "town hall" meeting, or newsworthy stakeholder event. Sending a press release early in the day and earlier in the week increases the likelihood that it will be covered because journalists are looking for stories during these times. Once the press release is sent, make a follow-up phone call to ensure that it was received and to inquire about whether it will be covered.

Donors/funders typically need information to assess accountability and program effectiveness and to inform investment decisions. For example, health researchers reported the successful eradication of small pox, which led to the termination of funding for vaccination programs. Within donor organizations the type of information needs and audiences vary suggesting the need to package information accordingly (Baxter & Braverman, 2004). Information used for strategic purposes, often by the board of trustees or senior management, should be presented concisely with recommendations relevant to ongoing or future work. Program officers often have regular contact with grantees and are familiar with programmatic issues which may result in the desire for a full research report in addition to an audiovisual presentation.

Academic researchers and international agencies/organizations often use research with the goal of informing future projects and interventions. For example, the results of a clinical trial showed that a particular vaccine was not effective, which gave the research community an indication that alternative treatment options are needed. In addition, international agencies maintain research databases from which information can be publically accessed. Academic channels of communication typically include publishing a peer-reviewed article, which adds credibility to research and has the potential of reaching a large audience. Giving oral and poster presentations at professional conferences are effective means of disseminating information to fellow researchers and representatives from international organizations. Distributing a CD-ROM at meetings is another way of making research widely available. Lastly, making information available on academic, government and organizational Web sites and through distribution lists increases the accessibility of research.

4. How will you assess information use?

The premise of disseminating research information is to facilitate its use for policy and programmatic decision-making. Collecting information to document the results of the dissemination efforts allows researchers to assess whether the communication objectives were achieved and how research findings were used. Documenting data use is important information to illustrate that research can improve decision-making. Positive experiences using

Different Assessment Methods

- An *information use log* keeps track of feedback from stakeholders, the news stories reported and articles written, and the number of times research has been cited in the academic literature.
- A *formal survey* conducted with a sample of stakeholders from the target audiences provides feedback. Questionnaires can be sent via e-mail six months and one year after a dissemination event or clients attending a family planning clinic can be asked to complete a survey regarding improvements in the quality of care.
- A series of *key informant interviews* with stakeholders at various levels of the health system can provide insight into if and how research was used.

data also helps to grow demand for quality information. Lastly, the assessment of information use can assist in the identification of best practices in communicating data and research utilization. Regardless of which assessment method is used, incorporating the following questions can help determine whether the expected outcomes were achieved:

- Was the information used by the target audience?
- How was it used, e.g., policy, advocacy, planning or programmatic decision-making?
- If the research information was not used, what were the barriers to use, e.g., availability, accessibility, relevance, and/or usefulness?

Other constraints to information may exist. For example, an organization may not have a strong culture of evidence-based policy development or stakeholders may perceive the research data to be of poor quality and are discouraged from using the data. These types of issues can be explored during the communication assessment or separately in more detail (Foreit et al., 2006).

SUMMARY

Researchers provide health information to empower stakeholders in making evidence-based decisions. Yet, research is frequently not available, accessible, relevant, or useful, which limits its applicability for improving health systems. Developing an information dissemination strategy is likely to increase stakeholders' research uptake. The strategy should be considered during the research planning process and address the communication objectives, target audiences, appropriate channels, and assessment of use.

Stakeholder groups vary by their information use, familiarity with research terminology, and preferences for receiving information, resulting in the need to tailor research findings and recommendations for different audiences. Some communication methods and formats may be effective with multiple stakeholder groups. Despite the need to adapt research findings for each stakeholder group and present the information in a user-friendly manner, stakeholders generally prefer key messages that are concise and actionable. Finally, tracking if and how information was used allows researchers to document whether the communication objectives were achieved, to assess the effectiveness of communication efforts. and to promote best practices that are informative for future initiatives.

Additional Resources

The BRIDGE Project and Africa's Health in 2010 Project. *Repositioning Family Planning: Guidelines for Advocacy Action*, 2008. Available at http://www.prb.org/pdf08/familyplanningadvocacytoolkit.pdf

The East-West Center provides useful materials on policy communication and related topics. Available at http://www2.eastwestcenter.org/research/popcomm/

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