Introduction to....
Stakeholder engagement

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IDS Knowledge Services

August 2013

In research, publications and other outputs are often seen as the end product. But for Think Tanks and organisations aiming to affect change in the world, an output is, at best, a means to an end. To give research 'legs', Think Tanks often create a package of outputs and activities that engage, and even involve, reach various audiences, or stakeholders throughout the process.

Effective research communication stems from a good understanding of the end audiences it aims to affect. So key Messages, activities and types of output should be largely shaped by depend largely on how stakeholders already understand an issue, how they tend to engage with new information, and when windows of opportunity occur to drive forward a new idea.

A number of tools exist to help Think Tanks think through the positionality of stakeholders and how to plan effective stakeholder engagement. This note outlines several of them.

Definitions

Stakeholders: anyone who has a 'stake' or an 'interest' in a particular initiative. The concept can operate at various levels of granularity. In other words, stakeholders can have an interest in an organisation, in a specific initiative or project, or in an overarching policy or objective to which specific initiatives contribute. Given this diversity, stakeholders are often grouped together into similar categories, like 'direct beneficiaries' or 'policy makers'.

Engagement: a set of activities that facilitate an exchange of knowledge between stakeholders. This may include one-off activities, but is usually a longer-term process of mutual learning.

Research dissemination / communication / uptake and 'knowledge translation': These are some of the many terms that are also used to refer to stakeholder engagement. There are slight differences between them. Dissemination indicates more of an information push, communication implies dialogue, uptake implies an information pull from stakeholders, while knowledge translation refers to a more systematic process of synthesis.

Stakeholder Mapping

A common first step in developing a stakeholder engagement plan is to map out and/or analyse who relevant stakeholders are. Depending on the scale of the initiative, this can be done fairly quickly or informally, in groups using a participatory approach, or more rigorously through a systematic process of stakeholder interviews. The table on page 2 provides an overview of several stakeholder mapping methodologies and when they might be most appropriate.

The purpose of a stakeholder analysis is not just to get a picture of a particular network, but to help identify key stakeholders with whom to engage. Prioritising stakeholders for engagement might be done in several ways, but it is important to consider both internal and external factors. Internal factors include: resources available for engagement, technical expertise and existing engagement infrastructure. External factors include: strength of existing relationship with stakeholders, how influential they are, how in agreement they are with the proposed initiative or objective, and how connected they are to other key stakeholders.

After prioritising a few key stakeholders, it is important to consider what they already know about a topic, their view or position on the topic, and how they tend to access information regarding the topic. It is also important to understand the current political and social landscape: what currently shapes the agenda and where does the initiative fit within that context?

Stakeholder Mapping

Name	Key elements	When to use
Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix (AIIM)	• Generates list of stakeholders • Produces a quick visual reference of stakeholders on a matrix with alignment on the x-axis and interest on the y-axis. Influence represented by size of stakeholder 'dot'	• Strong, simple planning tool • Best if initiative has a clear objective in mind • Can be done individually, but best if done as a group • Use to prioritise which stakeholders to target
Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis (PIPA)	• Stakeholders are written on cards of various colour/ shape depending on stakeholder category • Cards arranged according to relationships among actors • 'Beans' are placed on cards to denote influence of actors and/or to denote agreement/ disagreement	• Can be used as a planning tool, but particularly effective for retrospective evaluation • Best if done in groups – usually the project team, but can include or be done exclusively with stakeholders • Useful to get a picture of how stakeholders are interconnected • Useful to get an overarching picture to help determine appropriate objectives
Network Mapping (Net-Map)	• Similar process to PIPA, though considers relationships and flows (of information, money, etc.), influence, and priorities	• Can be used as a planning tool, but particularly effective for retrospective evaluation • Often done directly with a group of stakeholders and not necessarily solely within the team of a particular initiative
Social Network Analysis (SNA)	• Usually a quasi-quantitative tool that uses computer software to map relationships between stakeholders	• Useful when trying to plan a complex intervention, but might be over-ambitious for stakeholder engagement planning • Can help identify key network nodes i.e. nodes who are very connected, or 'bridges' that connect disparate parts of networks, etc

	Useful resources
	The Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix (AIIM) guidance note. (www.odi.org.uk/publications/5288-stakeholder-engagement-stakeholder-analysis-aiim-alignment-interest-influence-matrix-roma)
	Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis (PIPA) Wiki (http://boru.pbworks.com/w/page/13774903/FrontPage)
	Transform Nutrition Kenya Stakeholder Mapping Report (http://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00060368:4c7ccbc3a7e9fa27caca92181bdd8df5.pdf)
	Social network analysis (Wikipedia) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network_analysis)

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Based on this information, work to establish a short but flexible engagement strategy that presents a package of material targeted at the key stakeholders. However, flexibility is key: strategies and plans should never be set in stone. Ensure that the strategy builds in opportunities for scanning the external environment for engagement opportunities.

Top tips

- **Involve stakeholders throughout the initiative**, not just during 'dissemination' time.
- **Use a stakeholder mapping tool** to ensure everyone involved in the initiative understands which stakeholders are involved, who the key stakeholders are, and what the plan is.
- **Walk a few miles in the stakeholders' shoes.** After identifying a few key stakeholders, consider what they already know about a topic, what their views or positions are, and how they tend to access information on that topic.
- **Don't just invest in stakeholders who are already engaged in the topic**, or with whom the organisation has a long-standing relationship: seek out influential stakeholders who might need convincing of the importance of the issue.
- **Plan for the expected – but be in a position to take advantage of the unexpected.** Opportunities will arise – always be on the lookout.

How to talk about stakeholder engagement

- **Do say:** Engage early, engage often.
- **Don't say:** A standalone journal article should do the trick (unless, of course, the audience is strictly academic).

Useful links

DFID (2013) Research Uptake: A guide for DFID-funded research programmes. London, UK: UK Government. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/200088/Research_uptake_guidance.pdf

Young, J. and E Mendizabal (2009) Helping Researchers become policy entrepreneurs. Briefing Paper 53. ODI: London, UK. www.odi.org.uk/publications/1127-become-policy-entrepreneur-roma

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Prepared for the IDRC-funded Think Tank Initiative Policy Engagement and Communications Program