Communication

Communication is an essential cross-cutting task for practically every aspect of a TDR project. It is important to understand communication as an ongoing process that holds the entire project together and must be implemented throughout the project, not simply at the end to report on project findings.

As the commonly cited adage goes[1], "The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished." Communication is never done. Project teams typically fail to begin (or quickly cease) talking about it, even be conscious of it, because it is so deeply embedded in human interactions. But communication tends to be remembered when lack of or miscommunication leads to problems.

When is communication needed and for what?

Because communication is necessary at every phase of a project, it needs to be made an explicit cross-cutting practice to prevent or minimize problems. It is needed for different aspects at different stages of project implementation.

In the co-design phase, communication is necessary for:

- Idea formulation and negotiation with team members and societal partners;
- Reflection and reflexivity on one's own role and stance vis-à-vis the matter of concern and others in the project;
- Relationship and trust building;
- Developing a shared language (and understanding) across disciplines and sectors;
- Articulation of project goals;
- Writing a persuasive funding proposal;
- Setting the tone for a meeting or to launch a collaboration; and
- Developing and coming to a jointly agreed project plan.

In the co-production phase, communication is part and parcel of:

- Learning relevant methodological skills;
- Carrying out project tasks;
- Integrating different types of knowledges;
- Growing understanding and respect for each other's expertise;
- Reflecting on project advances;

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[1] *Various authors have been attributed to this adage, but who expressed this sentiment first has not been conclusively established (see https://quoteinvestigator. com/2014/08/31/illusion/).*

- Working through problems, challenges, delays, or conflicts among team members, societal partners, and funders;
- Reporting on project progress to team members, societal partners, funders, and the wider public; and
- Coming to agreement about project outputs (formats, length, timing, etc.).

In the co-implementation phase, communication is essential in:

- Presenting project findings in scientific outlets (e.g., peer-reviewed specialist journals or conferences), as well as to lay audiences (e.g., press releases, TV interviews, user manuals, policy briefings);
- Conducting outreach;
- Developing skill-building/capacity-building trainings in the use of tools, data, and information developed during the project;
- Evaluation of project process and achievements and related reflection and learning;
- Reporting to funders; and
- Appropriately closing out a project (e.g., reflection meeting with partners, reporting, debrief with team members).
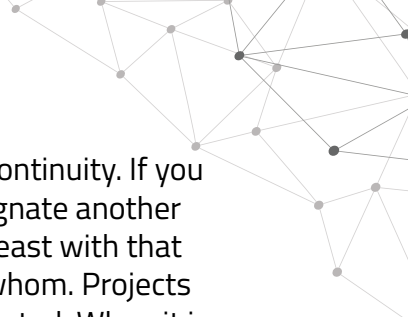
The above list is categorical, exemplary, necessarily abstracted, and incomplete, but it points to the need for ongoing team- and project-internal communication, as well as for external communication. It hints at the many different audiences that need to be involved or addressed, and hence the different formats, venues, languages, levels of detail, and specificity needed, as well as the implied differences in formality and informality.

How often and how to communicate in transdisciplinary research projects

Different team members and project partners will require different frequencies and depths of communication. For example, a key societal partner may need weekly written updates or phone calls, a project advisory group only a quarterly newsletter, a funder meeting only once or twice per year.

Depending on the scientific advance or the political significance and timing of the delivery of results, communication may be mostly outward-facing and intense at certain times (e.g., at the launch of a project, at a major discovery or turning point in the project, at the release of project results), but only quietly internal for much of the duration of the project.

For all of these reasons, it is advisable to develop a communications plan integral to your project plan or as a separate, parallel plan with specific tasks and deadlines oriented toward different audiences. Consult experts, university media offices, and other effective communicators for different communication tasks. Consider obtaining a tailored communication training that can equip you and your team with the requisite skills.

In short, communication in TDR projects requires skill, deliberate attention, and continuity. If you do not have the skill, patience, or capacity to do communication well, hire or designate another team member specifically for that task. Consult and communicate frequently at least with that person so as to stay up-to-date and clear on what is being communicated with whom. Projects run into unnecessary hurdles or can go off the rails when communication is neglected. When it is well tended, communication creates the relational glue among team members, partners, and other relevant audiences that makes projects fun and successful. It must not be neglected.

Further reading:

- Bagnol, Brigitte, Elizabeth Clarke, Mu Li, Wende Maulaga, Hilda Lumbwe, Robyn McConchie, Julia de Bruyn, and Robyn Gwen Alders. 2016. Transdisciplinary Project Communication and Knowledge Sharing Experiences in Tanzania and Zambia through a One Health Lens. *Frontiers in Public Health* 4 (February).

- Fischer, Cornelia, Verena Radinger-Peer, Larissa Krainer, and Marianne Penker. 2024. Communication Tools and Their Support for Integration in Transdisciplinary Research Projects. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 11 (1).

- Minois, Nadege. 2023. The Keystone of Success: The Crucial Role of Communication in Project Management. Institute Project Management.

- Suldovsky, Brianne, Bridie McGreavy, and Laura Lindenfeld. 2018. Evaluating Epistemic Commitments and Science Communication Practice in Transdisciplinary Research. *Science Communication* 40 (4): 499–523.