

Communicating locally led nature restoration: themes and insights

KEY POINTS

REDAA partners are using a range of communications techniques creatively and resourcefully despite limited capacity, often prioritising verbal and visual formats rooted in local languages and cultures.

Addressing communications and cultural barriers, including a variety of languages and social norms, is a common challenge among communication professionals working on locally led nature restoration initiatives.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for locally led nature restoration communications, especially when featuring relatable, real-life stories.

Nature communicators across Africa and Asia are working towards shifting power and creating spaces for communities to tell their own stories in their own terms. Shared themes and insights point to a more mindful and people-centred approach to communications.

Communications professionals across Africa and Asia came together for a training course focused on strategic communications for locally led nature restoration initiatives.

Through a variety of activities and topics, the group explored what works and what doesn't, when communicating in diverse, multilingual and remote contexts.

Over the course of six weeks, the Reversing Environmental Degradation in Africa and Asia (REDAA) programme hosted the Communications Learning Course, aimed at equipping REDAA partners with the tools and knowledge to create new, or enhance existing, communications strategies to increase the impact of their projects' goals.

Fifty-one communications professionals working on locally led nature restoration initiatives across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia joined and exchanged their experience, learnings and challenges. This briefing paper pulls together the key themes and insights that emerged from the participants' ongoing conversations, written exercises, case studies and oral contributions.

Navigating language and cultural barriers

Addressing communications and cultural barriers, including a variety of languages and social norms, is a common challenge among communication professionals working on locally led nature restoration initiatives and they are dealing with it in creative ways. In countries where multiple Indigenous communities with different social norms and languages coexist, this is particularly relevant.

The representative of Trias East Africa, Neema Mollel, explained how communicating across different languages and cultural backgrounds sometimes led to misunderstandings, in the context of communicating with local farmers and pastoralists in the southern highlands and northern (semi-) arid areas of Tanzania. Trias use simple, clear and relatable language for local farmers, often incorporating local dialects or culturally relevant references. All this while maintaining their content's original intent.

WWF Tanzania communication strategy included the use of radio broadcasting in the Maasai language to promote sustainable land use – explained communications officer Gladith Yoabu – and the creation of 20 community listener groups to amplify the message. But when the Tanzanian government banned radio broadcasting in vernacular languages, the project was significantly limited to deliver accessible information to local communities.

Elida Fundi, outreach officer with Community Forest Conservation Network (MJUMITA), also from Tanzania, shared some tips to ensure language inclusivity and accessibility. The network addressed the language barrier by employing staff from the community it worked with, making vernacular languages a key requirement for a job with the organisation.

Language is not the only thing limiting communications: varying behavioural norms can present a challenge when trying to get acceptance for a message. Some cultures, like the Maasai, for example, value respect for hierarchical structures and formality in their communication. It's essential to pay attention to the tone and use "polite, respectful language, especially when addressing elders" shared Faith Tanu, communications officer with WWF Kenya.

Real stories, real impact

Many participants shared the value of using a storytelling approach to gain acceptance and shift narratives and behaviours, with a focus on real-life stories, which people can relate to. This is a common pattern across projects and geographies.

"Storytelling, for example, is useful to shift the narrative from the global to community perspectives" shared Lassana Kone, project lead with Forest People Programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Similarly, Jimran Mohammad Saiak, youth environmentalist and content creator from YouthNet Global, Bangladesh, said that storytelling is a powerful tool for advocacy and that doing it effectively "bridges the gap between data and action". Among successes Jimran shared was the growing engagement of young people through their multimedia storytelling, beginning to influence local climate adaptation policies.

Trias East Africa used success stories from local entrepreneurs to make complex development efforts relatable and to inspire action. Neema Mollel explained that "by sharing real-life experiences in an engaging way, we inspire action, funding and policy shifts that benefit more people." However, she also flagged that "some beneficiaries are hesitant to share personal experiences; it requires "mutual trust that is built over time" – highlighting the importance of valuing engagement as part of any communications strategy, to build trust and lasting relationships with the communities.

Sisile Chowdhury, Arannayk, Bangladesh, adds that sharing "real life experience is a great way to connect with the audience". However, Vishnu N.M. from Keystone Foundation, India, warns us of the danger of unchecked information, which could lead to ambiguous or false communications: "If we are using stories in our reports, we should check the origin of the story – maybe it's not true – if not validated with the community members".

Lassana Kone works to secure Indigenous Peoples' rights to land and resources in the Congo Basin. He told the group how they used a short film to communicate to decision makers the

importance of including marginalised groups in law making and measured how many people in sectoral ministries had seen it, given their feedback direct to the groups they were working with and acted on the message to invite Indigenous groups to participate in meetings in the capital.

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On the fringes

Practising effective communications in remote locations and with marginalised groups, such as Indigenous communities or people not speaking the official, national languages, was a shared theme.

Some common solutions included prioritisation of face-to-face engagements, employing participatory approaches to co-create communications content and outreach, the use of multiple communications channels – such as radio, flyers and community meetings – using local languages and applying a gender lens to make sure women are included.

WWF Tanzania told the group that when the local radio station, ORS FM, key to amplifying the message to Maasai communities, was temporarily off-air, it disrupted communication with local communities. Their partnership with BBC Media Action allowed them to install a new transmitter and restore radio broadcasts, ensuring continuity of communication.

Many participants recounted how their organisations deployed the 'train the trainer' approach for engaging remote communities. That is, they trained local communications champions on the ground, building local capacity to communicate either verbally or by producing communications materials. For example, YouthNet Global organised storytelling workshops to train young climate activists on effective communication and advocacy skills.

Co-creating with communities

Participatory approaches were a widely used communication tool among the course participants. Some of the lessons they learnt included: letting the community present their own story; before any broadcast, ensuring that a community representative had reviewed the content; and engaging the community to ensure that communications content and activities were not causing harm. As one person succinctly said: "No consent, no content."

Baraka James, communications officer with MVIWAMA, Tanzania, for instance, engaged garlic farmers in group discussions to identify needs and gaps in garlic production and selected farmers to share their experiences on their radio broadcast, aimed at agricultural experts possibly far from where the farmers were based.

The Keystone Foundation explored the Indigenous concept of relationality to connect with the peoples they work with, paying attention to how research and communications should be more mindful and relational.

Better strategies through ongoing learning

This session provoked huge interest among both cohorts as an area that either doesn't get the attention it deserves or which throws up numerous challenges. Vishnu N.M. highlighted the challenge of collecting data through regular outreach activities when core communities were miles away from the office base.

Nevertheless, there was some good experience sharing: Ritcheil Cahilig from the Haribon Foundation in the Philippines told how they regard evaluation as being about monitoring behavioural change and how it depends on recognising rights and there being openness and confidence in telling stories.

Baraka James said "Sometimes, we evaluate the success of a project by analysing what the target audience remembers and frequently talks about. This insight helps us understand where their interests and priorities truly lie."

On the subject of learning and adapting – YouthNet Global recounted how they adapt their language and tone depending on the audience (as all good communicators should do), using formal language for policy discussions and conversational tones for social media. The Forest Peoples Programme changed meeting times to accommodate harvest periods and hired Indigenous facilitators to encourage more women to attend meetings, after noticing a drop in women’s participation.

Conclusions

The experiences shared during REDAA's Communications Learning course reflect a deep commitment from partners to engage in grounded and non-extractive communication practices that support the projects' restoration goals.

Across all regions, nature communicators are working towards shifting power and creating spaces for communities to tell their own stories in their own terms. Participants demonstrated how communication is more effective when it is context-specific, reflecting the social reality of the communities. Language and social norms are still a challenge that require creative thinking and collaboration. Storytelling is a powerful tool for locally led nature restoration communications, especially when featuring relatable, real-life stories. Those working with remote and marginalised groups often face logistical and cultural challenges, but through inclusive and participatory approaches and trusted partnerships, they are finding ways to overcome them. And the need for continued observation and learning reminds us that communications work is not static, it requires testing, listening and adapting.

Finally, keeping the communications strategy in mind at all times is essential to ensuring day-to-day communications are aligned to wider programmatic goals. In all, these common themes and insights point to a more mindful and people-centred approach to communications, built upon care and trust. Get in touch with organisers at IIED to contribute your thoughts.

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About the REDAA programme

Reversing Environmental Degradation in Africa and Asia (REDAA) is a programme that supports locally led research and action for nature restoration and climate resilience in Africa and Asia. It is funded by UK International Development from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and managed by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).



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