

BOND Guidance Notes Series 5

Getting the Message Across

This is the third in [a set of four](#) advocacy guidance notes, which can be read as a series or separately.

Planning Communication

Once your advocacy goals have been identified, you need to:

- Build the message.
- Identify and analyse your audience.
- Use a variety of media to get the message across.

Building your message

Craft each message for an individual *even if you're targeting an institution*. Think yourself into their shoes before you begin to communicate.

- Hammer the message home, *using as many different forms and using as many types of media as you can*.
- Make sure that the message is consistent: *do not change your message until it has been absorbed by your audience*.
- Create different 'entry levels' for people with different knowledge levels, *so that there is something for everyone who wants to be involved. But don't patronise people by producing materials that oversimplify the issue and create distorted understanding*.
- Feedback progress of the advocacy work to those people on the ground who are doing the legwork. *You will need them again*.
- Let those on whose behalf you are advocating - for example, farmers in southern Sudan - speak, write, lobby etc. for themselves rather than through an intermediary.
- Identify and exploit external and internal events and opportunities. *Prepare a timeline and make sure you have the appropriate, well-researched information to feed into them*.
- Use the language of the target audience *and avoid technical terms or jargon*.
- Be clear about what you want your audience TO DO as a result of hearing your message.
- If you're working as part of a broader network or collaboration, make sure that the message neither surprises nor compromises any of the members.
- Opportunities to get your message across are few and slim: *grab them when they do come and make sure you have the research ready so you can respond immediately*.

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Audience Analysis

Gather as much information as you can about the proposed audience for your message so that you deliver accurate, credible, appropriate and timely information to them and thereby prompt them into taking action.

Where do they go for information to help them make decisions?

Library? The Internet? Personal contacts by telephone? Newspapers? Bear in mind (a) politicians and policy makers are likely to be influenced by weighty national programmes and papers. They will refer to this media for information and they will also be cited and quoted on it; (b) in rural areas, people will obtain more information from the radio than any other media. In countries where many languages are spoken, there are many local programmes broadcast in local dialects which are useful to reach communities who often do not have other sources of information.

Who do they listen to and for what kind of advice?

Who are their trusted advisors? Where would they go to substantiate claims made by your organisation? What sources of information do they definitely regard as 'dodgy'?

What time of day are they likely to be most receptive to 'your' kind of information?

First thing in the morning before they have become embroiled in the business of the working day? Last thing at night when they have left the office but are still musing over work in their subconscious? During coffee break when they're feeling relaxed and 'off-duty'?

Using the media

The media - that is, printed materials such as newspapers and magazines as well as radio and television broadcasts - are always hungry for stories. If you are clear about what you have to say and can explain why this information is of interest to a particular audience, you stand a good chance of interesting the media in your 'story'.

The media will re-work your story to suit their 'house-style' and their audience. Once you hand over the information you lose control over how it is used. If your work exposes partners to any 'risk', political or personal, you have serious responsibilities to consider before you go ahead.

If your organisation has a Press Office, use them. They are well placed to know what media to target in order to reach specific audiences.

Which Medium?

There are advantages and disadvantages with each channel of communication, and it is useful to be aware of these characteristics once you know your audience, your message and your timeframe.

Most northern agencies wanting to get involved in advocacy work are looking particularly at their own role in influencing northern policymakers. But there are many opportunities to get involved with, learn from and strengthen advocacy within development projects, at local, national and regional levels. For this sort of advocacy, as with activities taking place in the north, there is no 'right' and 'wrong' way to communicate with your intended target audience.

The following table assumes communication with a very broad range of advocacy targets, focusing not only on 'decision makers', but also on building awareness amongst communities in developing countries. Building a constituency for change in the South can be a powerful tool. The ability of your message to appeal to 'the poor' also provides a vital measure of its appropriateness and legitimacy. The table does not try to capture the fine detail of each channel of communication but rather seeks to give an overview of the characteristics of each. The scale runs from +++ (most likely to be applicable), to - - - (least likely to be applicable).

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	Reach Poor	Participation	People Reached	Cost
<i>Leaflets</i>	+	+	++	+
<i>Meetings</i>	+	++	---	-
<i>Video</i>	-	+	+	--
<i>TV</i>	--	--	++	--

<i>Tapes</i>	+	-	+	-
<i>Radio</i>	++	+	+++	++
<i>Slides</i>	-	-	-	-
<i>Posters</i>	+	-	+	-
<i>Theatre</i>	++	++	++	++
<i>email/web</i>	---	++	++	++

Using drama to identify messages and communicate them

Using drama within a participatory development project is a good way of bringing out the issues and getting consensus on what changes your collaborators want to bring about with your support.

Drama also helps to highlight emotive issues which might not otherwise have been articulated.

Once the drama, songs and stories have been created, they can be transformed into performance for education and advocacy work at community, district, regional and national level.

The drama can be used to stimulate discussion and raise awareness in schools or clinics, or in non-formal sittings with peer groups. It can be used as the basis for generating other materials around the same subject matter, such

as comic books and posters which might appeal to a broader audience. The drama itself can be documented, either on paper or on video if available, and used as part of an overall monitoring and evaluation system.

Getting the community themselves to identify and articulate the issues through drama not only raises skills and awareness levels amongst the participants, it brings credibility to the messages relayed through this media.

The drama can be video-taped to show to planners and policy makers, and responses can be captured on video and relayed back to the community, thus facilitating some sort of dialogue when none previously existed.

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Example: Campfire, Zimbabwe

Drama was used to great effect in Europe in the mid 1990's in a campaign for the rights of rural communities to harvest their wildlife and natural resources for their own benefit.

Local talent from within rural communities in five countries was used to portray the real-life drama of surviving in these marginal lands. A story-line was put together and toured in selected European countries to raise awareness of the issues.

Playing to policymakers in Brussels and Washington, it successfully questioned the morality and fairness of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

One to one lobbying

'The bus is crowded'. Policymakers are generally busy people who are bombarded with ideas, both good and bad, all the time. 'The bus is crowded' with people other than yourselves

trying to make an impact so you need to be particularly focused, vigilant and determined to be heard and understood.

'The art of the possible'. Choose advocacy objectives which are achievable starting with changes in practice; administrative orders; manuals, rules; acts and finally national constitutions.

Prepare your Plan of Action

- Build a strong case for proposed change;
- Identify precise policies which need changing;
- Contact like-minded organisations for potential collaboration and support;
- Formulate the proposal and request a meeting with targeted individual.

Prepare a strategy to get yourself and your issue heard

- Locate crucial person (call her/him A) and the people who influence A;
- Locate key officials who are sympathetic to your proposal and try it out on them, seeking guidance on how best to influence A;
- Seek advice from influential people on how to influence A;
- Invite influential officers to visit your organisation to familiarise themselves with your work;
- Use the media to create a favourable climate for your proposal;
- Create a contingency plan if your proposal is rejected: for example persuading the person above A to get them to reconsider the proposal, or waiting until the staff member has moved on and try again with their replacement.

Follow through if your proposal is accepted

- Suggest that a drafting committee be established, with a representative from your organisation, to bring about the proposed change;
- Offer your organisation's services to assist the officer responsible for implementing change;
- If these formal offers are rejected, keep informal contact;
- Follow through all procedural levels until the policy change becomes reality at all levels;
- Remember to thank everyone who had anything to do with bringing about the policy change - even those who were reluctant collaborators: you may need their help again in the future.

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Influencing bureaucrats

- Make sure you've got the right one - who can actually pull the levers you want pulled.
- **Aim high** - know who is going to make the ultimate decision. Work backwards from there, rather than thinking first about all the people you already have access to.
- **Understand how they work** - what are the limits on what they might be able to do for you.
- **Make your problem their problem**
- **Do your homework**
- **Remember they're human too**

- **Have fun**

Working with MPs

- **MPs - particularly under New Labour - are not very important people.** You need to have a good reason for going to them rather than directly to the decision-makers. However, in specific locations, MPs are starting to make their voices heard - Select Committees are a particularly good example. Also some of them are good media figures.
- **Don't try to approach them all.** Research your MPs before you start. There are a number of directories which list the interests and histories of MPs - Vaschers, BBC, etc. It is also worth looking for information on the Internet.
- **Go for quality, not quantity,** in terms of engagement with the issues and ability to get things done.
- **Present your arguments in terms they understand.**
- **Think about how you are going to contact them** - letter writing is likely to get bogged down in the mass of mail. It is well worth going to hang around in the House.

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Producing your own news

Producing your own newsletter or fact-sheet has a number of advantages over using the media to communicate your message to a range of audiences.

- It gives you total control over the information that is shared with the general public.
- It enables you to communicate complicated issues clearly, using attractive design and layouts, and words which an audience unfamiliar with the subject can understand.
- It can be used as part of a broader Public Relations strategy to keep the organisation's name and message focused in the minds of their supporters and the more general public.
- It enables you to keep supporters informed at the same time as enlisting their help in specific campaigns.

'One-off' publications that coincide with a particular event you're promoting or being part of are useful to provide snapshots of the issue at hand, what needs to be done to resolve it, what role your organisation has in this resolution and what you want the reader to do to help.

Using video

Video is becoming increasingly important in bridging the gap between policymakers and those whose lives are framed by the policies they make.

- Video can overcome problems of illiteracy and bring credibility to groups who have been marginalised because of their lack of formal education.
- It is becoming more widespread and therefore less alien to southern communities who might have rejected the technology a decade ago.
- It is becoming cheaper to acquire and operate, and more acceptable as a credible and long-lasting form of documentation of events and images.
- It facilitates 'horizontal communication' between communities as well as between different groups and can be used to convey the voices of those advocating for change directly into the halls of power and rooms of decision-making in the north and south.
- It can be used to encourage individuals to analyse their own reality and reach consensus within a community on what changes need to be made and by whom.

However, like all tools which can engage greater participation in advocacy and practical project work, video can also fail to meet people's expectations of it.

- If introduced without due thought and foresight, it can exacerbate existing power relations within a community.
- A shoddy product doesn't do justice to reality nor explain it adequately will harm your case.
- Video can be just another technology toy left behind after the development project moves on.

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Key lessons emerging from the discussion of media and targets

- Two-way information flow (as opposed to 'information delivery') stimulates debate, allows for trading/negotiation around realistic goals which both parties can achieve and accept, and builds relationships. These flows can be achieved through - face-to-face meetings, telephone calls and exchange of letters or documents.
- The conventional 'big media' are useful for creating the 'background awareness' in targets and the 'background pressure' amongst supporters which create the opportunities for change.
- Directly communicating your message (rather than using an intermediary, like a journalist) allows you to control the message very carefully and is probably better once you already 'have the ear' of the target.
- Repetition of a message over time and using a wide variety of media is an effective technique.
- It is important to be able to take advantage of opportunities to advocate - to be re-active as well as proactive. Defining a balance between these two activities can be a very delicate calculation. You should take advantage of all opportunities, but that can mean tailoring your message to the circumstances to such a degree that you lose your focus, or your mandate.
- It is important to think about what you want the target to do as a result of receiving the information and then assess which media is most appropriate for this circumstance.
- The credibility and transparency of the source of your information can be as important as the media that delivers it.
- The use of celebrity can provoke media coverage, but they're a notoriously unreliable bunch.

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