

Developing a communication strategy

WHEN?

When in the process should this strategy be developed?

It is recommended that the communication strategy for any national ecosystem assessment (NEA) is developed as early as possible during the *scoping* stage, and then kept under review and updated as necessary throughout the NEA process.

For example, Colombia developed a communication strategy very early in their assessment process which supported the production of key outputs for Colombia's assessment, including a visual identity for their NEA, a web page, videos, podcasts, articles and digital pieces highlighting key information about the NEA. This benefited the assessment process as it helped the team develop public awareness on Colombia's NEA and how it can support policymakers. Colombia's communication strategy included the participation of a communication expert in the Advisory Group, delivering strategic advice throughout the process. The communication strategy also identified methods to make sure the call for assessment authors and reviewers was spread as widely as possible. This included coordinating with the communication offices from other institutions to disseminate opencalls. This strengthened the NEA process with a diverse team of authors and reviewers, increasing the credibility, transparency and relevance of Colombia's assessment.

WHY?

Why is it important to include this aspect in a National Ecosystem Assessment?

Communication strategies set out the rationale and approach to communication and engagement decisions that will be made throughout the assessment process. A communication strategy does not necessarily include detailed activities and outputs as it should be complemented with another document, a communication *plan*: this plan includes more specific details on tactics, timelines, activities and budgets. A communication strategy will address *internal* and *external* communications and engagement. Internal communications focus on improving communication and collaboration within the assessment team and with key stakeholders. External communications focus on wider stakeholders and other audiences that are not yet engaged in the NEA but may have an interest in the process and its outputs, either now or in the future.

NEAs synthesise and assess information from a variety of knowledge types (e.g. scientific, management, indigenous and local knowledge, etc) into a policy-relevant output, so that it can be used during decision-making processes. Thus, developing a communication strategy at the start of an NEA increases opportunities for engaging with relevant knowledge holders, opinion leaders, public personalities and those positioned to increase its impact at the right time, via the right media. It does so in the following ways:

- **Understanding how to engage and communicate with the target audience.** Identifying key partners, target audiences and the best means to communicate with them from the start allows for a more effective communication throughout the assessment process. This includes identifying and collaborating with partners who can help us communicate and relay important information (i.e. the communications offices of stakeholder institutions).
- **Mitigating communication risks.** Recognising potential communication risks early in the process can allow designing a communication strategy that will avoid or mitigate these risks. For example, insufficient communication with key stakeholders during the selection of key policy questions may result in limited interest and engagement in the overall NEA process. This could jeopardize national ownership of the assessment and its subsequent impact.
- **Enabling adaptative management of communications.** Monitoring and evaluating the impact of the communication strategy throughout the lifetime of the assessment can provide valuable insights for adapting the initial plan and increasing its impact. The communication strategy should be a live document that is regularly updated and adapted to respond to each stage of the assessment and its corresponding needs.

WHO?

Who does this stage relate to?

The communication strategy should be created and managed by the Technical Support Unit (TSU), bringing in relevant communications and outreach experts, as they are coordinating and overseeing the whole assessment process. It should be directed at both internal and external audiences fitting their different needs.

Target Audiences	
Internal Communications Internal communications focus on people/groups that are more closely related to the assessment and currently involved and engaged in the NEA process. They are the people who can ensure the successful implementation of the assessment process. For example: the country assessment team will be part of your internal audience, including the Technical Support Unit/Secretariat, the Steering Committee, and the assessment authors including Assessment Co-Chairs, Lead Authors, Contributing Authors, Fellows and Reviewers. Internal audiences can also include key stakeholders in government & civil society who are critical to the NEA throughout the entirety of its process. Internal communications aim to ensure that those who are most closely involved and invested in the assessment are well informed, and can effectively communicate and contribute to the assessment process, whether from technical or administrative perspective.	External Communications External communications focus on those who are not directly involved in the assessment process but can have an influence on its impact at some stage. This includes decision-makers that are potential users of the NEA's findings in the future but are not currently engaged in the NEA process. External audiences may not have detailed information or knowledge of the NEA process as internal audiences. They may require more background information to better understand your key messages. Remember that some people/groups may start off as external audiences, and then as the assessment progresses, they become more engaged in the process and shift to internal audiences. One key goal of external communication is to inform external audiences and the wider public of important messages about the assessment, to ensure that the basic knowledge about the NEA process is widely disseminated, and to encourage wider engagement.

Input from internal and external stakeholders is critical, and communications should be designed to meet their needs.

Consulting with key stakeholders and the wider assessment team on the communication strategy can extend the assessment's reach and amplify key messages.

Seeking support from specialised communication professionals (e.g. translators, writers) could enhance the reach of communications, supporting the future impact of NEAs.

Hiring a media consultant, translators, trained science writers will require resources, but can strengthen communications.

Social media can be a useful tool to enhance the visibility of the national ecosystem assessment.

HOW

How to develop a communication strategy?

A communication strategy aims to support the credibility, legitimacy and relevance of the NEA process and its outputs by outlining the following: how to identify and engage stakeholders throughout the assessment process; how to ensure effective communications between members of the country assessment team; and how to present findings and knowledge gaps to a wide range of audiences.



Here is a general outline of the key elements which could be included in a NEA communication strategy. This should be adapted to suit national contexts:

1. Introduction

- Contextualise the strategy by outlining the project and describing the overall impact it is working towards

2. Outcomes of Strategy

- Create vision statements for what a successful outcome of the project will look like.
 - E.g. "The assessment outputs are successfully communicated to, and utilised by policy-makers"

3. Communication Objectives

- Establish which objectives the communications are aiming to achieve, as statements of intent.
 - E.g. "To communicate the assessment outputs in a way that is accessible and poignant to policy-makers"

4. Target Audiences

- Identify the main audiences that will be targeted by communication efforts.
- *Internal audiences* can include different stakeholders involved in the assessment process throughout its different stages;
- *External audiences* can include those who are not involved in producing the assessment but may benefit from its findings, including the general public.

5. Key Messages per Target Audience

- State the key messages you are trying to convey to each of your identified target audiences.
 - E.g. To policy-makers: "This is what we know about the status of our key ecosystems"

6. Communication Channels per Target Audience

- Determine which communication channels may be appropriate for conveying key messages to each audience.
 - E.g. The general public: social media, videos, infographics
- TOP TIP: It may be appropriate to use reports to convey key messages to policy-makers, whereas the public may respond and engage better with a video or infographic

7. Activities and Outputs

- Outline the timeline of the communications activities throughout the project.
- TOP TIP: Aligning communications with awareness days can create a good hook and generate interest

8. Branding Guidelines

- Define branding guidelines.
 - E.g. Logos, disclaimers, ...

9. Monitoring and Evaluating

- Define a way to monitor, evaluate, and potentially improve the impact of communications efforts.
 - E.g. Peer review, social media analytics, ...
- TOP TIP: Think about the feasibility of delivering communications during the planning stage

RESOURCES

- Examples of communication strategies will be uploaded to the [Case Studies](#) section of the NEA Initiative's website. Visit: www.ecosystemassessments.net/resources