

Communicating and disseminating findings

An important part of the work of National Information Platforms for Nutrition (NIPN) is to produce evidence-based analysis to inform national policy makers and programme planners and to support their decisions.

For the flow of information to be effective and efficient, there is a need (1) to develop and apply a communication plan for the NIPN and (2) adopt good practices for communicating with decision makers.

The **first guidance** note in this section provides insight on how to design a communication plan for the NIPN, while the **second guidance note** highlights some practical considerations for communicating evidence to policy makers.

1 - NIPN communication plan

1.1 - Content of a communication plan

This guidance note focuses on the development of a NIPN Communication plan.

Communication is a key element for NIPN:

- With different **objectives**
- To different **audiences**
- With different **messages**

This is the **communication strategy**.

And:

- Using different communication **channels** and **tools**
- At specific points in **time**

These are the **communication activities**.

This note aims to provide high-level guidance on what a NIPN team could include in the communication plan, but this is of course very much dependent on the country context and the team's capacity and resources.

In any case, a communication plan should define the **communication strategy** that specify the **objectives**: **WHY** you communicate, the **target audiences**: to **WHOM** you want to communicate, and the **key messages**: **WHAT** you want to communicate.

It should also describe **HOW** to do this, with which **tools** and through which **channels** and **WHEN**, identifying key **communication opportunities** throughout time.

In addition, a communication plan should include an **M&E plan** with indicators to assess the achievements of the communication activities, as well as a **budget**. The communication plan should be commensurate with the available human and financial resources and proportionate to the scale of the action in terms of cost-benefit. Even if there is no fully dedicated communication officer, a designated communication and visibility focal person should be identified within the team.

At the end of the guidance note, there are references to communication examples of different NIPN countries and to additional useful guidance that can be found on the web, while the next guidance note provides specific insight on how to communicate with decision makers.

What should a communication plan contain?

Content of the communication plan		
Communication strategy	WHY?	Objectives
	WHO?	Target audiences
	WHAT?	Key messages
Communication activities	HOW?	Channels and tools
	WHEN?	Timeline
M&E plan	How to measure success and adapt?	
Resources	What human and financial resources are needed?	

1.2 - Communication strategy: objectives

There are multiple reasons for communication by NIPN but **clear objectives** of communication for NIPN need to be defined.

These objectives may change according to the phase in which NIPN finds itself: the launch of the platform, the establishment of the Multisectoral Advisory Committee, the consultation with sectors to formulate priority policy-relevant questions, the dissemination of key lessons learnt from NIPN analyses, etc.

For instance in the set-up phase of NIPN, it is extremely important to **raise awareness** about the goal, structure and way of working of NIPN, and to **advocate** with stakeholders for their participation. Also it is important to create **visibility** for the platform, its actors as well as its donors.

At a more advanced stage, when the NIPN team has started to implement certain activities it is important to **engage stakeholders** in those activities, for instance to validate priority policy-relevant questions or to share a first output (such as a NIPN dashboard) to establish the platform's credibility.

It is also essential to communicate about the **outputs** of the NIPN processes or the **results** of NIPN analyses.

There are also different objectives for **external** communication (to stakeholders of NIPN) and **internal** communication (within the NIPN team), **see below table**, and for giving **visibility** to the NIPN versus **communicating specific information**, **see below link**.

Examples of objectives for external and internal communication

External communication	Internal communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy and awareness raising on NIPN • Establishing credibility of NIPN • Engaging NIPN stakeholders • Influencing nutrition policy decisions • ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create common understanding and vision about NIPN operational cycle • Ensure alignment in understanding and focus between NIPN policy and data components • ...

Visibility is part of the communication plan

Difference between communication and visibility

Visibility of a specific organisation, project or initiative can be created by using their logo and acknowledging their contribution in the different communication events that are being organised.

For instance during a launch event of NIPN in a country, the logo of the implementing organisations and the donors should be displayed, and if available the logo of the NIPN (either the global NIPN logo or the one which has been created specifically by the country NIPN).

The NIPN countries which receive funding from the European Union are requested to develop a visibility plan following [specific EU guidelines](#).

Communication and visibility are not the same. **Communication** is about specific messages that one wishes to convey, to achieve a well-defined objectives, reaching specific target audiences, using appropriate communication channels and tools. A communication plan is more elaborate, but can include a specific chapter on how it intends to create **visibility for the NIPN**.

Creating a specific **identity and branding** for the NIPN, including the design of a logo and the use of consistent templates/formats for reports and presentations, is part of the visibility plan.

1.3 - Communication strategy: target audiences

It is important to identify the different **target audiences** for communication. The specific audience will depend on the objective of the communication as described before.

For instance, when the objective is to raise awareness about NIPN, the target audience may include all actors in the multisectoral nutrition system of the country.

However when the objective is to influence nutrition policy decision-makers regarding a specific response to one of the policy-relevant questions, the audience is likely to be much narrower as engagement zoom on the decision-makers.

Of course, it is also possible to advocate with a broader audience in order to create a bigger influence on the decision-makers.

Audiences may exist national and subnational levels. In countries where decision-making is done at sub-national level, the different steps of the NIPN operational cycle will be carried out at regional or district level, and the target audience of communication will therefore also be the nutrition policy decision makers at subnational level.

In any case, the choice of audience for a specific communication objective will need to be highly strategic if the ultimate purpose is to influence policy, programme or investment decisions. Knowledge of the priority objectives and key interests of the stakeholders themselves is key as this is often a good entry point to start communication: start with what is of interest to them. Only sending the NIPN messages, without connecting to what is of interest to the stakeholders may not fall into fertile ground.

It is recommended to do a **stakeholder mapping** (see below link) of the actors in the multisectoral nutrition system with regard to their levels of interest and influence on NIPN in the country, and to identify what the key interests of the stakeholders with the most influence are (**also refer to section 2.2**). Examples of target audiences are provided in the **table below**.

Examples of target audiences

Internal/directly involved stakeholders	External stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NIPN core team • NIPN partner organisations • The NIPN Multisectoral Advisory Committee • Donors • ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broader set of stakeholders in the multisectoral nutrition system • Actors in nutrition-sensitive sectors • Policy decision-makers • ...

A stakeholder mapping is useful to identify your target audiences

How to do a stakeholder analysis?

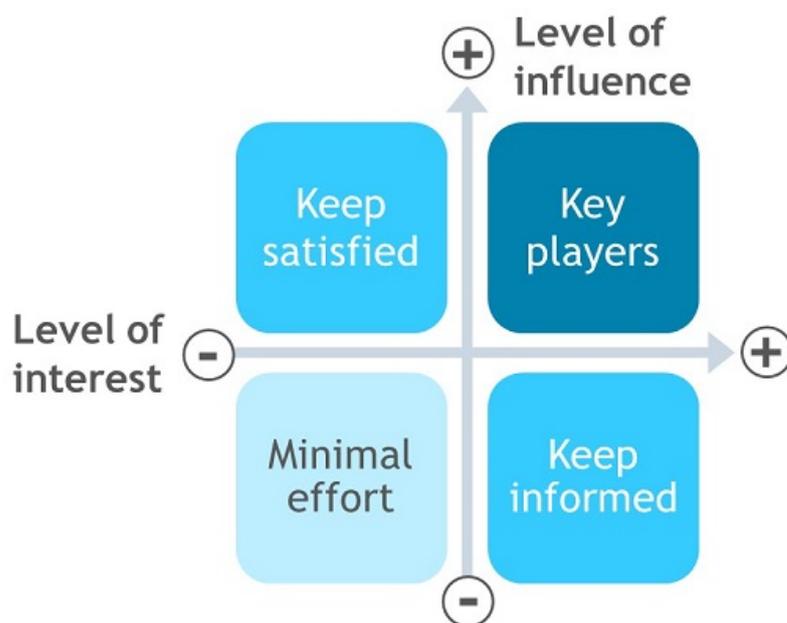
It can be very useful to do a stakeholder analysis of the overall nutrition audience to better understand which actor has which attitude towards the project and how influential that person is.

Someone who is very positive and influential could become a champion for the project in the communication approach, whereas someone who is largely negative about the project's approach, but also influential needs to be managed carefully and communication with this person should be geared towards changing her/his attitude from negative to neutral.

If a person with a negative attitude is perceived as having very limited to no influence, less efforts need to be made to communicate with him/her.

A stakeholder mapping is usually done along 2 dimensions: the level of interest in the topic/project (negative to positive) and the level of influence or power the stakeholder has in the target community (in the case of NIPN, the multisectoral nutrition system).

Map stakeholders according to level of interest and influence



1.4 - Communication strategy: key messages

The communication strategy should define the **key messages** to be shared. The **formulation** of the right message depends again on the objective of the communication, but also on the audience and the communication channel that is chosen. One does not communicate a message using the same words to nutrition researchers, to politicians, to decision makers or to donors.

Initial key messages about the NIPN function can be defined as part of the visibility and branding strategy, and then for each specific communication activity. The key messages will then be used consistently throughout the different communication tools: for instance a brief, a presentation, a press release, on the social medias, etc.

Though the exact formulation of a message is highly context-specific, it is important to stick to a number of basic principles which include:

- Target the messages to the audience, but **remain consistent** across communication tools & audiences
- Make sure that your core message is **supported by evidence**, be credible
- Be **concise**, to-the-point and factual
- Be positive and use **active language**
- Keep it **simple**, use plain language and avoid jargon - be understood
- Visualise your messages or **illustrate** with a concrete example
- Focus on **results** rather than on activities
- **TELL A STORY** because stories and experiences will be remembered, but facts and figures won't

1.5 - Communication activities: channels, tools and timeline

Different communication **channels** and **tools** may be used to reach your target audiences, depending on the type of media they usually consult to be informed (**see below table**).

Nowadays there is a wealth of communication tools available, but the resources available to implement the communication plan will limit the possibilities. Communication channels and tools all have advantages and drawbacks, that must be weighted in order to strategically select a few ones that, in combination, are specifically adapted to the target audiences that need to be reached.

All communication tools have advantages and drawbacks

For instance, in this digital age, many messages are communicated through an organisation’s website, or through e-mailings. This is quick and efficient, but not necessarily very effective as recipients are inundated by information, do not read everything but choose and pick what seems most relevant to them.

Though researchers and technical people like to read the details of a study design and methodology, research reports are often too long and complicated for policy makers that have little time and are looking for digestible bits and pieces. Policy briefs extracting key messages for policy-makers are more adapted.

Personal interaction allows for direct interaction and adjustment of the messages and justification to the audiences reactions, but may be time-consuming.

Another important aspect to consider is the **timing of the activities**. Activities must be properly planned and sequenced, in relation to NIPN implementation stages and to important project milestones and results. An analysis of policy processes in the country (**refer to section 2.2**) may help identify ahead of time key communication opportunities for NIPN. In addition, it is also important to be able to take advantage of any appropriate **arising opportunity** to reach the communication objectives of the NIPN.

Examples of communication channels and related tools

Communication channels	Communication tools
Digital communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website • Social medias • E-newsletter • Videos • Photos • ...
Traditional medias (press, TV, radio)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press release • Press conference • ...
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations • Printed documents: leaflets, briefs, reports, infographics... • Visibility material: banners, goodies... • ...
Interpersonal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elevator pitch • One-to-one meeting • Interview • ...

1.6 - Monitoring and evaluation of the communication plan

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) is important to ensure that your communications are strategic, helping you to understand and learn from what works, what doesn't, when and for whom. It is also an important tool for **accountability**, helping you to demonstrate uptake, and that your work is of high quality and useful.

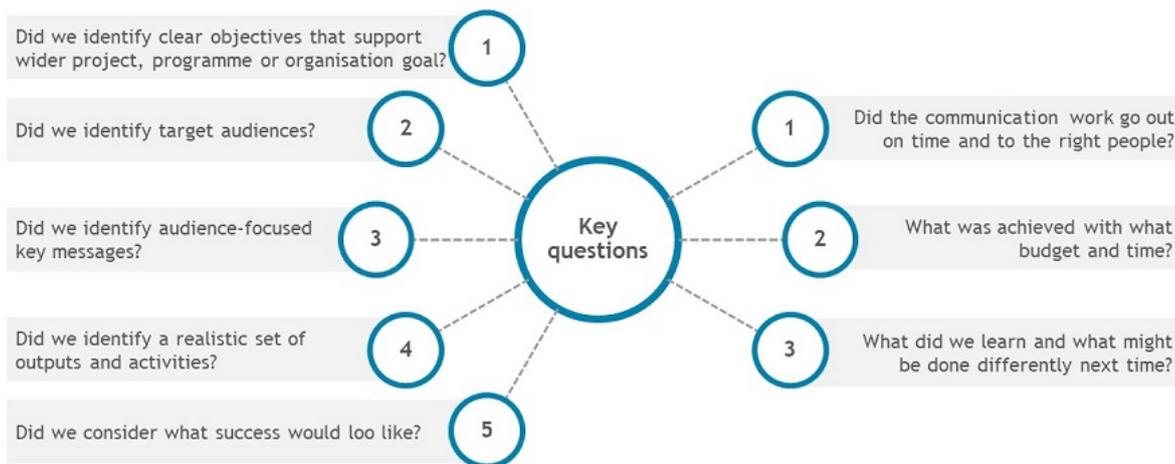
The Overseas Development Institute (ODI, UK) has developed a [toolkit](#) which is intended for use by communications, research and project implementation staff working in think tanks, universities and NGOs. This toolkit can be very useful for supporting the development of a MEL approach for the NIPN Communications Plan.

The toolkit highlights 8 key questions that need to be asked and answered when looking at communications strategy, management, what was done and what was learned ([see below figure](#)).

8 questions to address when looking back at communication activities

There are 5 key questions to address when looking at strategy, what was done and what was learnt:

There are 3 key questions to address when looking at management, what was done and what was learnt:



The information above should be backed-up by facts and figures, but can be brought together informally through a follow-up meeting or after-action review.

Source: Cassidy C. and Ball L. (2018). Communications monitoring, evaluating and learning toolkit. Overseas Development Institute, London.

1.7 - Examples of NIPN countries communication activities

The [table below](#) illustrates a few communication activities from NIPN countries. More information can be found by clicking on the links [underneath the table](#).

Communication tool	Dissemination channels	Dissemination opportunity	Target audience	Key message	Communication objective
NIPN branding (Niger)	Multiple	Regular	Multiple	NIPN has its own identity	NIPN visibility
Newsletter (Ethiopia)	emailing	Regular	Stakeholders with interest in NIPN process	NIPN implementation is making progress	Keep informed interested stakeholders
Press release (Laos)	Partners websites	NIPN capacity building workshop	Wide audience through journalists/ medias	National capacity are being strengthened through NIPN	NIPN visibility, awareness raising
Presentation of results of research report (Guatemala)	Dedicated event with key stakeholders invited	Publication of the research report	Influential decision makers in government networks	Some reasons for the lack of sufficient progress in nutrition outcomes	Understanding some bottlenecks in policies and plans implementation

[NIPN branding](#) (Niger)

[NIPN newsletter](#) (Ethiopia)

[NIPN Press Release](#) (Laos)

[NIPN dissemination event](#) (Guatemala)

1.8 - Additional useful resources on communication

- **Communication and visibility requirements for EU external actions:** [download pdf](#)
- **How to write a policy brief**
 - Guidance from International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada): [download pdf](#)
- **How to make an effective powerpoint presentation**
 - Powerpoint for Beginners by PowerPoint Channel: [watch video](#)
 - Tips for making effective powerpoint presentations from National Conference of States Legislatures (NCSL, USA): [visit webpage](#)
- **Next section** on **practical consideration for communicating evidence to decision makers**

2 - Practical considerations for communicating evidence to decision makers

2.1 - Key elements to consider

This guidance note is the summary of a report, based on a review of the literature, on interviews with key informants, and on the analysis of a range of information products in the field of nutrition, that identifies the best practices to apply when producing any materials, in order to ensure that outputs are seen, understood by, and hopefully acted upon, by their intended audience.

It will take you through the following points:

- Identify the specific **policy need**, the main audience and clarify the problem
- Capture people's **attention**
- Present clear, actionable **recommendations**
- Build your **credibility**
- Take care of the design and **presentation**
- Share your **messages**

The full report can be downloaded here:

Pittore K, Meeker J, Barker T. [*Practical considerations for communicating evidence to policy makers: identifying best practices for conveying research findings.*](#) Montpellier, France: Agropolis International, Global Support Facility for the National Information Platforms for Nutrition initiative. 2017.

2.2 - Identify the specific policy need, the main audience and clarify the problem

What stage of the policy process are you trying to influence?

One of the key barriers for policy makers to consider research in their decision making is that research outputs are not aligned with the policy-making process.

You need to identify the point in the policy process that you are trying to influence and consider the specific timeline during which key decisions will be made. As policy makers often have many competing priorities, make sure the purpose of your policy brief is clear and that it addresses a specific issue that they are currently facing. This requires regular engagement with policy makers to find out about the decisions they are making and their timelines, and then producing analysis to meet their needs.

What decision am I trying to influence? When will decisions be made? When is evidence most likely to be used in this process?

Now you know what policy decision you are trying to influence and the timeline for action, can you clearly define the problem you are trying to address and identify who you are trying to influence?

Being clear about the problem your analysis is addressing and knowing its intended audience saves the reader precious time. Policy makers need to quickly understand the challenge or problem. Framing problems in terms of practical considerations, such as the costs of action or inaction, can be effective.

Think about how you are describing the problem - can you summarise what the problem is in two sentences? What are the costs of inaction? What are the consequences of action?

Different people will have different data needs. Are you trying to reach a generalist working at the national level? Or someone with specialist technical knowledge who will want more detail? Will this person be interested in sub-national data, for example, about their region or constituency? Make sure the evidence you include speaks to the interests of your audience.

2.3 - Capture people's attention

Now that you have identified the specific policy need, the main audience, and clarified the problem, how will you capture people's attention?

Develop "sticky" messages

One of the best ways to do this is through information that is new, unexpected, surprising or different. This will engage the reader and make the message something that is more likely to be shared.

Telling stories

Remember that public policies are ultimately about bringing positive change to people's lives, so stories are a good way to connect with policy makers. Can you include a story that shows the human side of the data or evidence included in the analysis? Is there a way to demonstrate how people's lives will be positively affected by a suggested policy?

Assembling the evidence jigsaw

A single study or piece of evidence is unlikely to have a policy impact. However, researchers can play an important role bringing together various pieces of evidence in support of a particular policy.

2.4 - Present clear, actionable recommendations

You have managed to catch the attention of a busy policy maker, but what they really want to know is what can be done about this problem. Have you presented clear, actionable recommendations? Policy makers are often overwhelmed by large amounts of data and information. You must be able to take the complex and nuanced findings of your research and turn them into clear, actionable recommendations that are concise and memorable. If the recommendations are too complex, they will often be over-simplified.

Design simple messages which are unlikely to be over-simplified

If you include lots of warnings in your messages, these are often likely to be overlooked. Writing a message like "this will require a three part strategy..." reduces the likelihood that messages are oversimplified rather than adding caveats at the end.

2.5 - Build your credibility

Are the methods clear?

Providing a (short) list of sources of information and publications that were drawn upon in the analysis can be helpful. However, giving a detailed description of the methods is neither helpful nor necessary. As one study found: “researchers are preoccupied with controlling for bias, but the [policy makers] aren’t interested in the details, they just want to know what works”. You need to be clear about where your data is from, but you do not need to explain the methods in detail.

Is the policy brief clear about where the evidence was drawn from? Is it from a single study or a synthesis of studies?

Have you established your credibility?

Policy makers pay attention to who produces a policy brief. Establishing the credibility of your organisation over a long period is much more important than a specific piece of research.

2.6 - Take care of the design and presentation

Design and presentation are important, and influence credibility. Policy briefs need to be clearly written, easy to follow and attractively designed. Dense, disorganised text which is hard to follow will not be read. Good design is important, so make use of headings, subheadings and lists to guide readers to the key points and make the information easy to find and read. Creating an attractive design is also important for building credibility.

Keep it short, with key messages highlighted

Policy briefs should be no more than 1500 words and some argue that all your key points should be on the first page. For some types of complex information, it might be necessary to disseminate a longer, more technical report. However, this should be provided with a 1 page document with the key messages followed by a summary or policy brief, and finally the full report. This offers readers multiple formats, depending on their time, interest and expertise.

Avoid jargon; use plain language

Can your brief be easily understood by an educated person without a technical background in the subject?

Avoid too much detail

Statistics such as P-values or unnecessary figures are best left out of a policy brief as they can cause confusion and detract from your overall message. One researcher who was sharing findings with policy makers recounted that “during the meeting, I had one of the policy makers next to me ask, what does “n” stand for?”

Is it in the correct language for the target audience?

In some contexts, people's knowledge of English, especially at the sub-national level, will be limited. Make sure that documents are accessible to the audience you are trying to reach, so are translated correctly.

Would your message be clear in an image?

Use simple illustrations that can talk by themselves and convey a message at a glance.

2.7 - Share your messages

How will you get your findings into the hands of policy makers?

A plan for communicating research is needed and should begin at the start of a project, rather than waiting until the end to share findings.

*Have you developed a plan for engaging with policy makers throughout the research process?
What methods will you use?*

Have you chosen the correct messenger?

Who is best placed to share your findings? Is there a specific organisation whose opinion is valued or has the ear of the government? Sometimes it is more effective to find a supportive policy maker in government who can also promote evidence from within. Can you work with them to share the findings of analysis? Also, remember that policy products represent a type of participation and power. It is important that the role of the person or organisation producing the brief is accurately represented.