Learning from failures in communication: sharing lessons from research & practice workshop

Adaptation
Scotland
supporting climate change resilience

University of Colorado
Boulder

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ECCA 2017

The European Climate Change Adaptation Conference (ECCA) was held in Glasgow in June 2017. This workshop session was co-convened by:

- Celeste Young, Victorian Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University.
- Tanya Wilkins, UKCIP, Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford

Workshop team:

- Lisa Dilling, PhD Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, University of Colorado, Boulder
- Gregor Vulturius, Stockholm Environment Institute and the University of Edinburgh
- Anne Marte Bergseng, Adaptation Scotland

With thanks to:

- Jamie Clarke, Executive Director, Climate Outreach

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Executive summary

> **"**I could fill a whole forum with stories of things that didn't work.**"**
> State Government Practitioner, Australia

Adaptation is an area of innovation where often things do not go according to plan; it is primarily about action in a constantly changing context. When it comes to talking about adaptation (particularly in public forums) the focus often centres on success stories however this workshop illustrated that there is a place for learning from communication failures, and that it can be empowering for both researchers and practitioners in the adaptation field.

This workshop attracted over 50 adaptation professionals from the ECCA delegate group and was declared the 'most over-subscribed' of the conference. The objective was to have open discussions around experiences with adaptation communication in order to share and learn from what hasn't worked, and to look at what learnings had been derived from these experiences.

The key message from this workshop is that communication in adaptation research is an emerging area of practice, and the creation of spaces to support these open discussions and ongoing learning between diverse stakeholders, is an important part of progressing adaptation action.

This report forms the next step in exploring the need for an ECCA adaptation communication Community of Practice.

Introduction

The objective of this workshop session was to identify and discuss experiences of where climate change communication has not worked. This was achieved through a facilitated and frank discussion between the workshop team and ECCA delegates, drawing together an understanding of what lessons that had been learnt from this and to share these lessons.

The participants who attended the workshop were diverse, and ranged from government and non-government agency practitioners to consultants and researchers across more than 14 countries (most being European and UK locations).

Many participants initially indicated that they did not identify with being a 'communications professional' however the workshop process highlighted that in fact all adaptation practitioners were communicators at some level.

The workshop format

The first part of the workshop established the necessary context for the session through a series of short presentations from the workshop team. Each presentation deliberately focussed on personal examples of communication failures.

These included:

- **The importance of language** – Tanya Wilkins

- **Community engagement** – Lisa Dilling

- **Academic theory of adaptation communication** – Gregor Vulturius

- **Lessons from online implementation** – Anne Marte Bergseng

- **Communicating risk-based materials** – Celeste Young

Following these, the **first exercise** was to collate experiences with failures in adaptation communication through what is commonly referred to as 'fishing'. The idea is to throw out a question and to see what the participants bring into the space in response to this. Individual participants were asked to list a communication activity that didn't work and then discuss this as a group. Each group then provided feedback of the key points of these discussions to the broader group.

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The aim of the **second exercise** was to link these experiences to learnings. For this exercise, participants were asked to reflect on the previous exercise and think about the one piece of advice on climate change communication that they would tell the work experience kid. They were then asked as groups to select what they considered to be the top three pieces of advice. The individual groups again provided feedback to the broader group.

It was observed by each member of the workshop team that facilitated on each table that this was an engaging component of the workshop, with delegates arriving at the session not identifying with being 'communication professionals', however, all participants were able to contribute in relation to this area regardless of their background.

In receiving ad-hoc informal feedback on the session, the workshop team were pleased that participants shared that they now had a greater understanding of the role that communications plays across all policy and practice roles, not just those with 'communications' in the title.

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Workshop methodology

The exercises used for this workshop were based on a 'peer to peer' learning model that has been used previously to develop knowledge and skills between different adaptation practitioners, researchers and policymakers. This model was originally developed and piloted in Melbourne, Australia, 2012 as part of programme called Council Connections. This programme comprised of a series of 'test' workshops which were designed to support adaptation practice and build a community of practice between different stakeholders.

A key aspect of the workshop process was the creation of a 'safe space' using world cafe principles so practitioners could speak openly in relation to their work. The conversations solicited during these workshops centred around practitioners' experiences, and identifying needs and learnings to date. This approach recognises that adaptation is an area of innovation and that practitioners are primarily learning from each other as result.

The method applied at ECCA is widely used in areas of adaptation in Australia , with Council Connections featured in the Victorian State Adaptation Plan 2012 following the successful execution of the pilot programme with strong results achieved.

The ECCA 2017 workshop session exercises were adapted on the day in consultation with the workshop team to ensure discussions built on the existing knowledge of the delegates, and were able to maximise the levels of discussion between tables and as a group.

Outcomes

Exercise 1: What didn't work

The key theme that emerged in the first exercise is that a common failure is a lack of understanding of core components and processes necessary to support effective communication with stakeholders. In particular, there was a lack of insight into stakeholders and their specific communication contexts and needs, also which communication mediums, approaches and language types are needed to engage different audiences.

Another common failure mentioned was lack of understanding of core stakeholders and making inaccurate assumptions about both influencing contexts and the understandings of the science which results in poor outcomes. For example, "that people know things" and that there was a "common understanding" and:

" Assuming that all staff in the environmental organisation understand issues and feel empowered to act . **"**

One particular failure that was shared related to a lack of research into other influencing issues being faced by stakeholders that an exercise in stakeholder analysis would have revealed. As it turned out, in this example, adaptation communicators were not aware that a particular organisation was facing job losses which significantly impacted on their ability to be engaged in the adaptation process.

Not including or being able to access key stakeholders was also highlighted as a key failure. Examples included not being able to access broader audiences beyond "the same old faces", in particular, not being able to engage young people, and not engaging stakeholders from the beginning of a process, as well as:

" Not including decision-makers in the development of decision-making tools. **"**

It was shared that communication between different stakeholders had failed due to lack of consideration of who the key people who need to be communicated with, for example leaders or people on the ground.

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Siloed organisational structures and resourcing issues also were contributing factors to communication failures, such as the under-allocation of the time required to undertake effective communication and adaptation across all activities in a programme. This includes social media activity and online content production, as well as face-to-face engagement through initial 'sales pitch' meetings and the necessary follow ups.

Using specific modes of communication was central to many of the failures shared by the ECCA delegates. Generic communication failures that were also strongly prevalent in the adaptation examples that included:

- Using email not face-to-face communication

- Death by PowerPoint

- Leaflets and websites that were too text heavy

- Content that is not focused on a particular audience.

Other examples of failures in this area focused around formats for stakeholder meetings and included using an old fashioned academic annual meeting and a steering committee where stakeholders didn't get enough time to speak. One example, indicated the need to manage expectations and meeting format so that the meetings stayed on topic.

Another aspect of failures that was shared was the lack of understanding as to how to work with communication specialists to achieve an effective outcome:

> " Assigned photographers to capture eye-catching non cliché images for communication and got extremely clichéd images. "

Examples were also shared on the difficulties related to the translation of research from 'research speak' to end-user language as a result of a lack of understanding of the process of adaptation itself.

> " I had a long talk to stakeholders in what l thought was simple language. At the end l showed them a simpler example of a project outputs. It was the only thing they understood. "

Not framing through the audience's area of interest was another failure, for example, focusing on cost rather than explaining the risk, not using enough pictures and pitching the wrong way to an antagonistic audience who were conservative and defensive, also produced poor outcomes. Language specific failures included negative responses to words such as vulnerability and climate change and over use of uncertainty. Modelling responses to stakeholder questions were also not successful communication techniques

Using another person to translate also led to some failures – examples include the use of a politician to spread the message, and "an overly-excited psychologist" who was included in a workshop.

A lack of consideration of the stakeholder's context and possible reactions to the information also caused failures, for example:

- Not realising we have mingled people's private lives with proposed measures which resulted in a knee jerk reaction.

- End-users understanding but not liking the suggested solutions

- A programme that floundered due to "the personality of the person in charge."

In terms of organisational contexts "siloed structures, high turnover of staff" and also limited resources were also the basis for communication failures. These are of particular difficulty in adaptation given the cross-cutting nature of the decisions required as well as at a broader regional scale where multi-institutional decision-making is required.

Other factors raised related to communication failures included difficulties with discussing failure and focusing on action as a way of avoiding difficult conversations.

Exercise 2: The one piece of advice you would give

For the second exercise, groups were asked to think about the one piece of advice they would give to someone undertaking communication in climate change.

The key focus of many of the recommendations related to the need to approach communication from a stakeholder perspective, and to develop communication from this point. The need to "listen more than you talk" and to have iterative and inclusive communication which was tailored to the audience"was also central to many of the workshop participant's recommendations.

> " Be patient, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat but don't use jargon. "

Other recommendations highlighted the importance of getting to know your audience prior to engaging them, of valuing stakeholders and not making assumptions about who they are and what might interest them.

> " Give people the choice, agency and empowerment to think they have it. "

The need for more visual and less text based communication of information which is undertaken with stakeholders rather than told to them, was highlighted.

Recommendations also reinforced communication as an ongoing process which needs to build understanding and empower audiences if it to be effective. They also supported the use of more reflexive learning approaches which accommodate positive interaction as part of an evolving process.

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Conclusion

Overall the workshop illustrated that there is a place for learning from failures, and that it can be empowering for both researchers and practitioners in the adaptation field. Adaptation is primarily about action in a constantly changing context and forums where people can communicate openly about what does not work in a way that supports learning is a key part supporting adaptation action.

The workshop also reinforced the continuing need for different forms of communication which are tailored to specific stakeholder groups and align with their interests and values For example, this reflects the diversity of the stakeholder groups, and could include scientists, practitioners or community members. More importantly, it highlighted the need for researchers to think differently about their research, the role of communication and the stakeholders they work with.

> " Communication in this field is not a "cookie cutter" exercise - it is complex and context specific and requires planning and expertise to be effective. It is also not always a comfortable process. "

Using inspiring and entertaining narratives are key to developing adaptation communication practice, but can sometimes lack the deeper learning that practitioners and decision-makers can gain from each other through discussing what did not work and why. Providing a forum for this to occur is often overlooked at conferences, yet is something that is relevant for all those engaged in science, policy and practice.

The workshop also illustrated how communicators need to develop new and more inclusive approaches which address specific needs of different stakeholder groups to create shared understandings. In particular, it highlighted the importance of researchers valuing and understanding stakeholders and the practice of communication.

> " Being humble about your findings allows for reflective dialogue. "

The key message from this workshop is that communication of and engagement with adaptation research is a difficult and sometimes thankless task, and a specific skill that needs to be learnt. It is an emerging area of practice in adaptation and ultimately, not everything will succeed. Sharing and learning from what has not worked is on ongoing process which can be used to enhance current practice and build new knowledge. The creation of spaces which support these open discussions and ongoing learning between diverse stakeholders, is an important part of progressing adaptation agendas.

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