Communication Master Plan

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N2Africa

**Putting nitrogen fixation to work
for smallholder farmers in Africa**

Master Plan - Communication

I. Introduction and justification

The N2Africa Master Plans are documents intended to foster a common approach across the five Core Countries. The plans are designed to achieve the N2Africa Vision of Success and the objectives set out in the Research Framework of the approved project proposal. This means all Master Plans need to ensure timely delivery of the outputs and outcomes.

This Master Plan directly addresses a specific sub-objective:

1.4. Develop and operationalize a project-wide internal and external communication strategy

A comprehensive communications plan is needed to address a number of purposes outlined in Section II.

II. Underlying purpose

N2Africa focuses on knowledge generation and learning at all levels. Sharing of new insights and approaches is key to the success of the project. In addition, communication is important for the transformation of all results in the impact pathway – from intervention to output, outcome, and impact and crucial for the achievement of each result level that involves different target groups and audiences. Communication is thus central to our success and demands substantial attention. The approach to development of this communications plan has been one of wide consultation and reflection both within N2Africa and with leaders of similar projects in both the public and private sectors.

Aims

1. To ensure alignment and common understanding of the N2Africa Theory of Change and the general philosophy underlying our approach.

2. To share continuous learning as part of the N2Africa feedback loops both among partners, within countries and among countries.

3. To attract interest and new partnerships for N2Africa dissemination activities.

4. To inform and share the excitement of N2Africa within target countries and beyond.

5. To obtain feedback on project results from partners and beneficiaries, needs and opportunities of the smallholder farmers and integrate into subsequent actions.

Approach

The purpose of this plan is to define the communication requirements within N2Africa, to whom and how information will flow, and how these will be addressed. Key issues that are common to many project approaches to communication are:
- Who – both within and outside the N2Africa project – needs what information?
- What are the changes expected due to the communication of information?
- What information will be communicated, with what degree of detail and in what form?
- How the information will be communicated through meetings, written materials, email, telephone, web portal, radio etc.
- When and how frequently will information be distributed?
- Who is responsible for communications?
- Are they intellectual property (IP) restrictions on release of information, or on the timing of that release?
- How do N2Africa staff handle information that is confidential to individuals, public and private

partners? Who can advise or authorize communication on sensitive issues?
- What resources are available for communication?
- How N2Africa branding and standard templates and formats should be used, also when documents are produced in collaboration with other projects or organizations
- How are contributions of individuals and partner organizations acknowledged by N2Africa?

During the past months a number of communication specialists, journalists and other scientists involved in large projects have been consulted for advice. The impression this gives is that most projects in our domain focus largely on external communication - "spreading the word" - on the one hand to farmers, rural development workers (NGO and extension), and on the other hand to scientists and other, often poorly-defined, global audiences. Yet central to N2Africa is a reflexive approach to learning within the project, with a strong focus on feedback, learning loops and continuous improvement.

Questions that repeatedly come to mind are:
- How can we engender a culture of learning and sharing of information among staff within the N2Africa project.
- How do we stimulate more co-learning across the countries, among the staff within the project from the field assistants to the leadership team?
- How can we stimulate people to search and demand information, rather than simply pushing out reports and newsletters?
- How can we stimulate people to share their ideas, successes, problems and failures?
- How to achieve a good communication practice and ask people what concerns them and what they can do, instead of telling them what to do?
- How do we integrate the needs and opportunities of the smallholder farmers through improved communication processes and actions, and use this to increase adoption rates?

III. External communication

Forms of external communication used to date include:
- The N2Africa website – www.N2Africa.org - which has been refreshed and updated to improve searchability.
- The N2Africa Podcaster – the newsletter that appears every 2-3 months and communicates news and important developments.
    o The N2Africa Podcaster is mailed to around 1000 addresses and often stimulates interest and enquiries.
    o We understand that it is well circulated and read at the foundation in Seattle.
    o Some N2Africa countries are very active in submitting articles, others rarely contribute. Partners are stimulated to submit stories as well.
- Reports on progress and milestones – all of which are available on the website under "N2Outputs" totaling almost 70 reports to date.
- Postgraduate student research - 28 MSc theses and internship reports – available on the website under "N2Outputs"
- Short videos (available on the "N2Media" page of the website) produced mainly by Taskscape UK for a variety of purposes, namely:
    o Profiling work in the field and project staff for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
    o External communication of N2Africa activities – which resulted in >300,000 hits in a single year across the world
    o Training videos – for example, demonstrating the benefits of inoculation and how inoculants can be applied and used.
- Handbooks and dissemination materials for a variety of audiences were produced during the first phase of N2Africa and widely distributed. These included:
    o Farmers
    o Lead-farmers
    o Extension workers

- o Development workers
- o Agro-dealers
- The N2Africa Facebook page – https://www.facebook.com/N2Africa – was started in 2013 and has perhaps not been as successful at attracting attention as we had hoped. Short contributions are often first published on Facebook and then included in the Podcaster. One idea proposed is to ask the N2Africa postgraduate (MSc and PhD students) to use this more actively.

There is also external communication which is essential for N2Africa's reflection, development and learning.

Partnership platforms or project staff meeting individual partners or clusters of partners are essential to review progress of project implementation within a season or end of the season. The platforms are also used to share learning across partners.

- "Success" and key learning stories at country level can also be shared with partners' in-country and outside the countries. This is something have encouraged but it has not been done widely.

From the start N2Africa has strived to create a recognizable 'brand' across all documents using the N2Africa logo and matching templates for presentations, reports and newsletters.

Table 1. Strategies for external communication per stakeholder.

Stakeholder	Desired Outcome	Key Messages	Channels	Measurement	Responsibility	Deliverable Dates
Who are your key stakeholders?	*What do you want your audience to think / feel / act as a result of being communicated with?*	*What are the key messages you need to communicate to this audience/obtain to achieve the desired outcome?*	*How will you deliver/obtain your key messages to each audience?*	*How will you know that you've achieved your desired outcome?*	*Who is responsible for the design and delivery of this activity?*	*When and how often will this need to be delivered?*
Farmers, rural households Lead farmers	Enhanced knowledge of technologies Agribusiness Understanding of economic and nutritional benefits	Best management practices concerning varieties, agronomy, inoculants, fertilizers and other inputs Market information about input availability, market channels, market standards for produce, etc.	Field days, radio, posters, leaflets Training sessions, partnership platforms,	Survey of farmers' capacities, improvements in their performance	Design: Delivery:	When? End of season How often? Annually
Partner Rural development workers (extension, NGOs)	Enhanced knowledge of technologies and effective ways of extension delivery Implementation of demonstration and adaptation trials Generate learnings from trials Obtain feedback from farmers Transfer knowledge to farmers	Best management practices concerning varieties, agronomy, inoculants, fertilizers and other inputs, different ways of extension delivery, feedback from farmers	Field days, radio, posters, leaflets, manuals, guidelines, training sessions, end of season feedback sessions with extension agents, planning meetings	Feedback from farmers on performance of extension workers, feedback from project staff on performance of development partner	Design: Delivery:	When? End of season How often? Annually

					Design: Delivery:	
Agro-dealers, local traders/ Input suppliers,	Enhanced knowledge of; technologies, strategies for input supply to smallholder farmers	Awareness and subsequent supply of varieties, agronomy information, inoculants, fertilizers and other inputs, models of input supply, advise farmers	Posters, manuals, guidelines, training sessions	Feedback from Agro-dealers on inputs stocked, sold, and strategies used, feedback from farmers on adequateness of agro-dealers	Design: Delivery:	When? End of season How often? Annually
Millers, processors, buyers	Needs captured and integrated in research and dissemination activities	Obtain market requirements for various uses of legumes	Posters, manuals, guidelines, training sessions, partnership meetings, evaluation of technologies including such actors	Market access information by smallholder farmers (quantity produced, sold, price, etc)	Design: Delivery:	When? End of season How often? Annually
Policy makers			Policy briefs		Design: Delivery:	When? How often?
Regional, International policy makers, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Enhanced knowledge on project implementation status, results achieved, best strategies	Results achieved per the project results framework, what strategies worked, etc.	Annual reports, Podcaster, annual meetings, field visits	Submission of annual reports, Podcaster,	Design: Delivery:	When? End of year How often? Annually

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IV. Internal communication among N2Africa staff

N2Africa has gone through various phases during which the balance of communication relied on different modes of communication. The main forms of internal communication currently used are:

- Email both on a one-to-one and group level. It is often unclear who and why different people are, or are not included in threads.
- Telephone – which could perhaps be used more to handle issues immediately and reach decisions.
- The N2Africa Intranet has been renewed to improve search-ability. It provides an increasingly comprehensive repository of internal project documents, draft project reports, maps etc. We work hard to improve the interface to encourage staff to use it.
- Regular Skype/ WebEx among country coordinators for the Core Countries and Tier 1 countries. Given the large number of people involved and differences in time zones it is hard to get full attendance. The written monthly country updates fill the gaps for Coordinators who are not able to participate in the WebEx.
- Monthly country updates where coordinators give activity updates and progress of work in their countries.
- Workshops and planning meetings. These meetings should serve as reflexive planning meetings with partners and staff where stock is taken of progress and the learnings generated. This should result in planning of strategy. There are centrally organized annual planning meetings where all country coordinators and research coordinators attend. In addition, there are seasonal country planning meetings attended by all country staff.
- Meeting of specific subject matter staff (e.g. Field Liaison Officers, BDOs). During the first phase, meetings of the Field Liaison Officers from all countries proved to be useful in learning, exchange of ideas and information and development of a team spirit across countries.
- Visits by the N2Africa Coordinator and leadership team have been highly-valued in both problem solving and identifying new ideas.
- Fortnightly meetings among the Wageningen team have proved effective in identifying key issues that need attention. Minutes are shared with the Project Coordinator.
- Field days with participating farmers can have a very useful role in sharing of information among N2Africa staff as well as with project beneficiaries. Feedback from farmers and other actors need to be documented and integrated into next action/planning.

Issues:
- N2Africa progress and milestone reports are shared through email and on the Internet. Although this is a major means of communication within the project, it remains difficult to elicit feedback on draft documents. It is unclear why this is the case.

Table 2. Strategies for internal communication per stakeholder.

Stakeholder	Desired Outcome	Key Messages	Channels	Measurement	Responsibility	Deliverable Dates
Who are your key stakeholders?	*What do you want your audience to think / feel / act as a result of being communicated with?*	*What are the key messages you need to communicate to this audience/obtain to achieve the desired outcome?*	*How will you deliver/obtain your key messages to each audience?*	*How will you know that you've achieved your desired outcome?*	*Who us responsible for the design and delivery of this activity?*	*When and how often will this need to be delivered?*
Partner rural development workers (extension, NGOs)	Engaged and valued, part of a community	Updates on general project progress	Podcaster, website, videos, country meetings		Design: several; delivery: country coordinators, N2Africa office	At least once a month
	Lay-out demonstration and adaptation trials	Best N2Africa practices, philosophy of doing research on demonstration and adaptation trials	Trial protocols, data collection tools, training		Design: country coordinator & WUR team; delivery: country coordinator/FLOs	Once a season
	Transfer knowledge to farmers	Best legume practices	Field days, farmer visits		Design: partner & FLO. Delivery: partner	Once a season
	Feedback to N2Africa staff	Data, the season's learnings	Country meetings, meetings/visits N2Africa staff, email, telephone		Design: country team Delivery: partner	Once a season
	Feedback to farmers	Overall results of the technologies and if and why the farmer got different results	Field days, farmer visits		Design: partner & FLO. Delivery: partner	Once a season

N2Africa BDOs	Engaged and valued, part of a community,	Philosophy of project approach, Specific roles of BDOs in N2Africa,	Podcaster, website, intranet, Country team meetings,	Updates from partnerships, documented results of partnerships, feedback/learnings from partnerships	Design: several; delivery: country coordinators	At least once a month
	Provide coordination support to partnerships,	Management and coordination skills of partnership,	Country team meetings with technical support team at project level, exchange visits		Design: country coordinators, senior BDO, leadership team, all other staff; delivery: idem	
	Engaged all necessary partners to achieve intended results	N2Africa approaches and strategies,	Meetings with partners, trainings, protocols		Idem	
	M&E of partnerships	M&E of partnerships,	Protocols, data collection tools		Design: senior BDO, delivery: country BDO	
N2Africa FLOs	Engaged and valued, part of a community	Updates on general project progress. Specific roles of BDOs in N2Africa,	Podcaster, website, intranet, country coordinators, exchange visits, SBDO, M&E Specialist	Delivering training to extension workers, assist partners in setting up demos, adaptations, documenting results (M&E) from partners, documenting feedback from farmers, extension workers	Design: several; delivery: country coordinators	
	Transfer knowledge to partners and farmers	Best legume practices	Training		Design: country team, technical support team; delivery: FLOs	
	Lay-out demonstration and adaptation trials	Best N2Africa practices, how to establish trials	Training, trial protocols		Design: country team, technical support team; delivery: FLOs and partners	
	Project M&E	How to collect data	Training		Design: M&E specialist & WUR team; delivery: M&E specialist	

	Generating learnings out of M&E and feedback to project and partners	How to document field observations, how to collect data. Philosophy of doing research on demonstration and adaptation trials	Training, country meetings, stimulation from country coordinators, visits		Design: M&E specialist & WUR team; delivery: M&E specialist, WUR team, country coordinators	
N2Africa Country Coordinators	Engaged and valued, part of a community	Updates on general project progress. N2Africa philosophy	Podcaster, website, intranet,	Country plans in accordance with results framework, giving feedback on project strategies, partnerships, etc	Design: several Delivery: leadership team	
	Develop country plans in line with N2Africa philosophy,	N2Africa philosophy Importance of feedback and communication, M&E of project at country level	Annual meetings, master plans		Design: leadership team, technical support team; delivery: idem	
	Feedback to technical support team, partners,	Importance of feedback and communication,	email, telephone, (web)meetings, annual meetings		Design: leadership team, technical support team; delivery: idem	
	Coordinate partnerships,	Importance of and how to coordinate partnerships	email, telephone, meetings		Design: senior BDO; Delivery: idem	
	Coordinate country results according to the project results framework	Importance of and how to coordinate results	Annual meetings, meetings with M&E specialist, intranet, annual report		Design: M&E specialist, technical support team. Delivery: idem	
N2Africa technical support team	Engaged and valued, part of a community.	Updates on general project progress. N2Africa philosophy	Podcaster, website, intranet, project reports, journal and conference articles, meetings		Design: several Delivery:several	
	Provide technical support and feedback to country teams, project	Updates on activities in each country. Feedback from countries on technical support needed,	Monthly updates, Podcaster, website, intranet, email, telephone,		Design: several; Delivery: country teams. IITA Nairobi. N2Africa office	

	leadership	feedback to project leadership on project implementation and other specific issues	(web)meetings, visits		
	Generating learnings out of M&E and feedback to project and partners	M&E data	Intranet, e-mail		Design: M&E specialists and technicial support team. Delivery: country coordinators
N2Africa leadership team	Engaged, feeling part of the larger project, having access to material to share in other meetings/ with potential funders	Updates on general project progress. N2Africa philosophy. Country highlights	Podcaster, website, intranet, journal and conference articles,, shared folder with N2Africa presentations		Design: several Delivery: several
	Overview of project activities and delivery on milestones; "are things going in the right direction?"	Updates on milestones in each country	Monthly updates, annual reports, annual meetings, (minutes from) country meetings		Design: country coordinators; Delivery: IITA Nairobi, N2Africa office
	Overview of research ongoing in the project, engagement, quality control	Results of rhizobiology, agronomy and dissemination research	E-mail, intranet		Design: country coordinators; Delivery: country coordinators
IITA, ILRI, WU Leadership	Pride, joint responsibility	Major project outcomes,	Podcaster, website,		Design: several; Delivery: leadership team, N2Africa office	Every two months, or when needed
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Other funding partners	Pride, joint responsibility, value for money	Project progress, highlights	Podcaster, website, annual report, video-clips		Design: country coordinators, technical support team; Delivery leadership team, N2Africa office	Every six months, or when needed

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V. Other ideas for joint learning events

- Learning journeys – in which staff from a range of countries come together to visit a particular location and talk to a wide-range of different stakeholders. The focus is generally on key problems and dilemmas to share experiences among the project team and local stakeholders.
- Cross-country visits for country coordinators would be a useful way of sharing ideas and problems.
- Lead Partnership Coordinator (to communicate among partners within specific partnerships in countries) to avoid overload and duplication of information in cases where a cluster of partners form a single partnership.
- Partnerships Meeting Platforms where all partners meet (at least) quarterly to review progress of implementation and challenges).

VI. Communication with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

In order to avoid confusion in reporting and updates on N2Africa activities, we have agreed some simple ground rules for communication with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

1. All N2Africa reporting should flow through Ken Giller to Charlene McKoin and Jeff Ehlers.
2. Any other communication to the foundation regarding N2Africa should include Ken, Charlene and Jeff in c.