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 new insights and approaches is key to the success of the project. Communication is thus central to our success and demands substantial attention.

Within this communication masterplan, we distinguish between internal and external communication. Internal communication is critical for conducting all those activities that lead to the proposed outcomes. External communication is critical for reaching wider impact by sharing knowledge and for attracting partners with whom we together reach the outcomes.

The approach to development of this communications plan has been one of wide consultation and reflection both within N2Africa, with leaders of similar projects in both the public and private sectors.

**Aims**

***Internal communication***

1. To ensure alignment and common understanding of the N2Africa Theory of Change and the general philosophy underlying our approach.
2. To ensure that all project members have access to and understand the activities they need to undertake.
3. To ensure that all project members have the right set of skills to implement those activities.

***External communication***

1. To share continuous learning as part of the N2Africa feedback loops both among partners within countries and among countries.
2. To attract interest and new partnerships for N2Africa dissemination activities.
3. To inform and share the excitement of N2Africa within target countries and beyond.

**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?

This document is very much a work-in-progress that needs inputs from all involved in N2Africa – and is key to the lasting impacts that we could achieve.

III. External and internal communication

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.

Forms of communication used to date include:

* The N2Africa website – [www.N2Africa.org](http://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.
  + The N2Africa Podcaster is mailed to around 1000 addresses and often stimulates interest and enquiries.
  + We understand that it is well circulated and read at the foundation in Seattle.
  + Some N2Africa countries are very active in submitting stories, others rarely contribute.
* 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:
  + Profiling work in the field and project staff for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
  + External communication of N2Africa activities – which resulted in >300,000 hits in a single year across the world
  + 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 audiences included:
  + Lead/Master-Farmer
  + Farmers
  + Extension personnel
  + Agro-dealers
  + Technical personnel (laboratory)
* The N2Africa facebook page - [www.facebook.com/N2Africa](http://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. In addition to Facebook, linkedin could be used as a discussion forum.

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 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.
* 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.
* Workshops and planning meetings. The wide distribution of staff across regions and countries prohibits many face-to-face meetings with many staff. In addition to annual N2Africa progress and planning meetings, country planning meetings are attended by other staff.
* 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 very effective in identifying key issues that need attention.
* Sharing N2Africa progress and milestone reports through email and on the Internet. This is a major means of communication within the project. However, it remains difficult to elicit feedback on draft documents. It is unclear why this is the case.
* The N2Africa Intranet has been renewed to improve searchability. 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.
* Field days with participating farmers can have a very useful role in sharing of information among N2Africa staff as well as with project beneficiaries.

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.

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 cc.