

ANNEXURE A

Communication Techniques

How to Communicate

Be a Good Listener

Good environmental assessment processes require the views and inputs of stakeholders to be clearly understood. You need well developed skills in listening to achieve this. Follow the guidelines below¹:

- ✓ **Engage in active listening:**
 - While someone else is speaking, focus on trying to clearly understand what is being said, not on formulating your responses. If you find yourself formulating a response, you are not actively listening and likely to miss important information.
 - Do not assume after the first words spoken by someone else that you know what they are going to say.
 - Follow up with questions of clarification – not debate, i.e., probe for information – withhold response or debate until you have a clear understanding of what the other person intended to communicate.
- ✓ **If you hear something you disagree with, do not respond by arguing:**
 - Before you engage in a debate/discussion, start by asking an “open” question to provide you with more information or better understanding of what was being communicated.
 - Then, if necessary, pursue discussion/debate on the issue.
- ✓ **Engage in effective questioning:**
 - Ask open questions, not closed questions.
 - Open questions seek information.
 - Closed questions limit information, but there is the exception where closed questions can be helpful for clarifying in certain circumstances.
 - Effective types of questions are those that:
 - Probe for information.
 - Seek clarification.
 - Seek explanation.
 - Seek to understand the impact of a proposed course of actions.
- ✓ **Periodically summarise what you have heard:**
 - Use this to ensure that what you understand someone else to be saying is the same as they are intending to communicate.
- ✓ **Reframe where appropriate:**
 - Restate something in a manner that everyone understands or agrees with.
 - It is often useful to reframe from the negative to the positive.

¹ These listening tips are drawn from the work of Johnston and McLeod. See Johnston and MacLeod

- ✓ **Acknowledge what you have heard:**
 - If someone makes a suggestion, and after asking any questions you have regarding this suggestion, be sure to let the other person know:
 - what you understand them to have suggested; and,
 - what you think about their suggestion, i.e., what your reaction is.
- ✓ **Tell them what you have heard**

Accessible Communication

Don't underestimate the value of accessible communication in environmental assessment processes. Ensure that all stakeholders are informed and feel included in the process. Accessible written and spoken communication is an essential aspect of the process. Follow the guidelines below²:

Checklist: Am I Communicating Simply?

The following are a set of guidelines for writing in plain language. Remind yourself of the following:

- ✓ **One idea only per sentence.**
 - Organise information so that sentences are logically ordered and paragraphs deal with a single topic of information. Where technical words are necessary, include them in a well-organised sentence structure.
- ✓ **Use active, positive language:**
 - Maintain one tense within a single sentence.
 - Use active voice, not passive voice language, e.g., write "the assessment team is drafting a report", rather than "a report is being drafted by the assessment team".
 - Use first and second person rather than third person, e.g., write "you can send your comments to ...", rather than "one can send one's comments to ...";
 - Use positive not negative sentences, e.g. write "The administration may only endorse the report after consulting the community", rather than "The administration cannot endorse the report unless it consults the community";
- ✓ **Avoid jargon and difficult or offensive words:**
 - Avoid unnecessarily difficult words.
 - Avoid unnecessarily technical words.
 - Explain difficult or technical words where these are necessary to use.
 - Avoid sexist and offensive language.
 - Avoid foreign words and phrases.
- ✓ **Keep your language plain and simple:**
 - Delete words that are wasted or padding.

² These Guidelines on accessible communication are drawn from the work of Derrick Fine. See Fine, D., How to use Plain Language, Legal Education Action Project, Cape Town, 1995

- Use simple verbs instead of long phrases to describe actions, e.g., use “consider” instead of “take into consideration” or “apply” instead of “make an application”.
- Use simple adverbs rather than longer phrases, e.g., use “near” instead of “in close proximity” or “monthly” instead of “on a monthly basis”.
- Avoid overused expressions, e.g., “the bottom line”, “at the end of the day” or “explore every avenue”.
- Avoid outdated words, e.g., write “in this document” rather than “herein”, “a person who” instead of “whosoever”, or “so” instead of “hence”.
- Exclude repetitive or overlapping words, e.g., use “owing” instead of “due and payable”, “now/today” instead of “in this day and age”, or “able/suitable” instead of “fit and proper”.
- Be sensitive not to overuse popular words or abbreviations.
- Use simple connecting words, rather than complex ones.
- Be careful with referral words, e.g., write “these people” instead of “such people”, or “in point 4” instead of “above mentioned”.

Translation Tip: When you write something that needs to be translated, anticipate the difficulties faced by the translator. Write in plain language before the document is translated.

Document Design Tip: Anticipate the needs of a range of readers when you lay out a document. Think about those that are literate, as well as those with low literacy levels or learning difficulties. Also, anticipate those who are partially sighted or have impaired sight.

Tips for Speakers

Follow these tips for speakers:

- Speak from brief point form notes so that you maintain constant contact with the audience.
- Explain the structure of your presentation.
- Address the group in an appropriately respectful way.
- Don’t talk too fast.
- Avoid vague phrases.
- Ensure sentences and points are completed.
- Look out for signs that your audience follows you.
- Provide summaries of your presentation at key intervals.
- Allow time for questions.
- Explain things patiently.
- When you speak using a translator, agree with the translator before you start on the approach to translation. Work with the translator as a team.

Ways to Communicate

Look at the guidelines and tips in this annexure for ideas on how best to communicate within an environmental assessment process. Choose the approaches that are most suitable to your conditions and needs.

Brochures

Brochures are an effective way to communicate with stakeholders about the environmental assessment process and the issues being assessed. You can prepare them at the start of the process, or they can be issued later in the process when you need to disseminate information on the results of the assessment. They must be written in an accessible style and laid out for easy reading and good communication.

Tips and Guidelines

- Write brochures in plain and accessible language.
- Do not put too much information into a brochure. Rather produce a series of brochures if there is a lot you want to communicate.
- When you need to communicate with a diverse range of interest groups, rather tailor the material by producing a range of brochures that cover the same content, but which will appeal to different language, culture or social groups.
- Give your brochures within a single assessment process a consistent style and, if possible, a single logo, brand or slogan associated with the project.
- You can reuse the contents of a brochure in other media such as news releases or poster displays.
- Don't forget to provide contact information to stakeholders in the brochure.
- It is useful to include photographs, maps and illustrations in brochures. Take care, however, as semi-literate and illiterate people often have difficulty in understanding maps, let alone the written word.
- Include a tear-off response strip in your brochure. Stakeholders can use this to provide feedback to the project team.

Newsletters

When you are involved with a very long and complex environmental assessment process, consider issuing a regular project newsletter. They are different from brochures as they follow a common format, are issued on a regular basis, and are a way to provide news and ongoing information. You can produce them as folded A3 or A4 publications, and you should lay them out in an attractive way, which will help the reader, and also convey the message that the publication is newsworthy.

Tips and Guidelines

- Keep the articles in the newsletter brief (no more than 250 to 400 words). This will encourage participants to read them and also convey the sense of a newsletter.
- Write and lay out the newsletter in an accessible way.
- Present the information objectively. Also create opportunities for stakeholders to give their opinions through articles that they contribute.
- Newsletters should have a consistent style when associated with a single project so that they are easily recognisable and associated with the project.

Mailed Flyers

You may have the opportunity to distribute flyers in a regular monthly posting, such as municipal service accounts. This can be a very useful way to get the message out.

Tips and Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the insert in plain language and ensure that it is appealingly laid out. • The printing and packaging cost will be high. • You will be able to distribute a limited amount of information in this way. • Co-ordinate with the mailing system of the organisation that you are using. You need to avoid overlaps with similar mailings, which may cause confusion.
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Posters, Signs and Banners

Posters, signs and banners can be a simple effective means of advertising an upcoming event or raising awareness of an issue. They can be a useful means of getting a message out.

Tips and Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider where the poster or sign will be placed and how much time people will have to read it. In general, the less time for reading the simpler (and larger) the required text. • Use a simple eye catching headline in large font • Your sign should be readable from at least 2 – 3m away • Keep the text simple – don't try to put too much information on a sign. • Check your spelling and grammar – a badly spelled heading or slogan in large letters looks extremely unprofessional • If you are using colour, use a few colours and avoid the 'rainbow' effect. Check your colours for readability – for example yellow text on a red background is not that readable.
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Videos

A short video can be a useful way of communicating, but it is expensive and requires the equipment for making and showing the video. But it can be broadcast, if it is of a good enough quality. This will allow you to get your message to a very wide group.

Tips and Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It must be very carefully planned and budgeted. • Videos can become out of date. • Think about alternative technologies such as CD-ROM. • Professional quality videos take time to produce, and your project planning must factor this in. • Videos are a one-way means of communication. They cannot replace the vital need for interaction.
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Websites and Email

Where stakeholders have access, the internet is a cheap and very efficient means to distribute information on environmental assessment processes. While you can get out a large volume of information in this way, unfortunately not many within the region yet have access.

Tips and Guidelines

- You must be sensitive to the fact that only a small proportion of the public has access to this means of communication.
- Ensure that your project websites are easy to use.
- Organise the information on your website logically and in an appealing way.
- Update the information on a regular basis.

Short Message Service (SMS)

Use cellphone text messages to remind stakeholders about events and dates.

Tips and Guidelines

- Remember, not all stakeholders have access to cell phones.
- Get cellphone contact details from stakeholders.
- Use a service provider who can support the bulk distribution of text messages.
- You will only be able to send out a limited amount of information in this way.
- Don't use it as the only means of communicating with stakeholders. Use it to supplement other ways of communicating.

Briefing Sessions

Address regular meetings of stakeholder organisations to get your message out. Most civil society organisations conduct regular meetings, which can be used for this purpose. You can also organise special briefing sessions that are not part of a regular meeting programme. You can organise a "road show" which repeats a similar format of briefing sessions in different places with different groups of stakeholders.

Tips and Guidelines

- Make arrangements in advance with the leadership of the target organisation to provide input in this way.
- Respect the agenda of the organisation in making a presentation. Often your item will only be one of a number of items on the agenda.
- Keep briefings short and simple.
- Ensure that the message and pitch of the presentation is appropriate for the audience.

Community Theatre and Art Activities

Community theatre productions and art activities can be used to convey complicated information in an entertaining and accessible manner.

Tips and Guidelines

- In preparing a production, involve local community members who display an interest.
- Collectively developed productions can convey powerful messages;
- Consider getting professional help in theatre to assist with the structuring and production of a play.
- School projects such as painting competitions, essays and mural painting can be used to raise community awareness of important issues.
- Discuss proposed projects with teachers before introducing them; and,
- Plan events carefully and ensure that they are fun!

Media Coverage and Advertising

Use newspapers, radio and television as a practical and cost effective way of getting information out. But remember, most of the time you have no control as to how your information will be presented, unless you pay for an advert. It can be effective, but risky.

Community radio is a powerful means of reaching local communities in rural areas. It is particularly useful in communicating with communities who cannot read or write. Determine the community radio stations in the area of the proposed development and use the techniques below to get your message across.

Media Releases, Conferences and other opportunities

Use media releases to get a precise message out to the media. Use media conferences if you want to interact with a range of media representatives in one place.

Tips and Guidelines

- If possible, use a skilled person to prepare them.
- A well-prepared media release will make a journalist's life easy. They should need to make the minimum of changes to the release for it to become a good news story.
- Supplement your media releases by organising other activities that might get you coverage. Try to organise feature stories, photo opportunities and interviews with key individuals involved in the process.
- Media conferences allow journalists to ask questions. You can give coherent and consistent responses. But remember, you cannot control what comes out of the conference. That is in the hands of the journalists and the media.
- Invite the media to your other events.

Advertisements

Adverts are often a legal requirement in assessment processes. They are a good way to get your message across in exactly the way you want it to appear.

Tips and Guidelines

- Too often adverts on environmental assessment processes are dull and bureaucratic. Try to avoid this.
- Your advert should:
 - Give clearly information on the environmental assessment process, its objectives and focus.
 - Be easy to understand. Write it in plain language.
 - Avoid bureaucratic or legalistic style. This is a sure way to encourage fewer readers.
 - Give a clear indication as to how, where, and when the public can be involved.

Newspaper Inserts

When you are involved in an assessment process where you need to get your message to many members of the public, you could organise a special insert in the local newspaper. This could either be prepared and paid for by the publication if it considers it worthy enough; or, you would need to find the funds to do it yourself if you feel it is a very valuable initiative to take.

Tips and Guidelines

- They are costly.
- They must be accessibly written in a professional journalistic style and also well laid out.
- Distribute them on the day of the week or month that the newspaper usually has its highest distribution.
- Ensure that you meet publication deadlines.
- Include a public response sheet or tear off section in the insert.

Radio	
Radio is an ideal way to get your message out to many people.	
Tips and Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the community, public and commercial radio stations in your area. Find out which ones will cover your topic, or are doing so already. • If you simply want to advertise your process or event, try to organise a free announcement on the radio to be repeated at key times. Many stations, particularly those focussing on a smaller community are happy to carry these announcements. <p>News</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get your story onto the local news by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sending a media release to the radio station’s news editor or department. Follow up with a phone call; – Try to organise a brief interview to be carried on the news. Find a short and punchy way to get your message across. You are unlikely to be given more than a 15 second “soundbite” to be heard on the news. <p>Interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempt to get someone from your group or team interviewed more fully on the station. This will allow you to say more and give more background information and motivation. Some tips to remember for interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Make sure you know your subject before you go into the interview; – Stay calm and try to get your message across in a short and to the point way; – Don’t be intimidated or distracted by the interviewer’s questions. Remember what you want to say and get the message out regardless of the questions; and, – Make sure you project your voice clearly and try not to be too serious all the time. <p>Talk Shows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to get your subject onto a radio talk or phone-in show. This will give you a longer time to air your subject. Some tips to remember: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Contact the producer of the programme and motivate for your project to be the focus of a programme; – Offer someone who can be a studio guest. Advise them to follow the guidelines for interviews when they are on the air; – Monitor local stations for programmes which cover your project or any subjects related to it. Phone in and participate; and, – Set up a network within your organisation so that as many people as possible can know about a programme when it happens and so participate in it. Move fast and activate your network by phone as soon as a relevant programme is on the air.