

WLE Greater Mekong

Communications Strategy

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RESEARCH
PROGRAM ON
Water, Land and
Ecosystems



Greater
MEKONG

Introduction

WLE Greater Mekong is a ‘research-for-development’ (R4D) programme that implements research that will yield positive developmental impacts. *Communications are the primary way that WLE Greater Mekong delivers its research results into developmental impact, and are integrated into all sectors of its planning and implementation.*

WLE Greater Mekong has developed this strategic approach to its communications work, an approach that will (a) more practically position WLE Greater Mekong to better deliver upon its mandate; and (b) strengthen the programme and its methodology.

WLE Greater Mekong’s R4D focus is on the development of water resources, and related land and ecosystems. These are highly politicised resources in this region, largely *because* of their development.

The strategy described here is for ‘active communications’, as distinct from ‘passive communications’, which may comprise a research publication in a journal, the authors of which take no action to communicate its findings beyond academic and research circles. Active communication refers to the deliberative act of promoting and advocating the use of research results amongst the programme’s target audiences. The strategy employs a variety of ways to do this so as to improve the chances that they may generate outcomes; using the results to inform debate; and basing its advice and recommendations on the results. Importantly, WLE Greater Mekong sees those who produce this knowledge as active, responsible participants in its communication.

Strategic Mission

The primary mission of WLE Greater Mekong’s Communications Strategy is to deliver the programme’s research products into use.

Strategic Goals

- (a) To use the research knowledge generated by the programme to positively influence the ways in which water and land interventions are governed, monitored and managed.
- (b) To increase engagement and dialogue between actors in the Greater Mekong water and land development sectors.
- (c) To ensure that the knowledge generated and/or synthesised by the programme is relevant to, accessible by, and understandable to those who would use it.
- (d) To increase WLE Greater Mekong’s convening power and its role as a trustworthy producer and manager of relevant knowledge.

Elements

The WLE Greater Mekong Communications Strategy comprises four elements:

The task: to ensure that programmatic outcomes are derived from the research outputs that the programme generates by employing a variety of vehicles that encourage uptake, and by ensuring that its knowledge products are accessible, understandable and relevant to its target groups.

The vehicles: vehicles comprise the mechanisms that WLE Greater Mekong will employ to implement this strategy: (a) dialogues; (b) fora; and (c) media.

The focus: this strategy shall focus on influencing the knowledge, attitudes and skills (KAS) of (a) governments and regional and international organisations; (b) private sector land and water developers; and (c) students attending regional universities and other centres of higher learning.

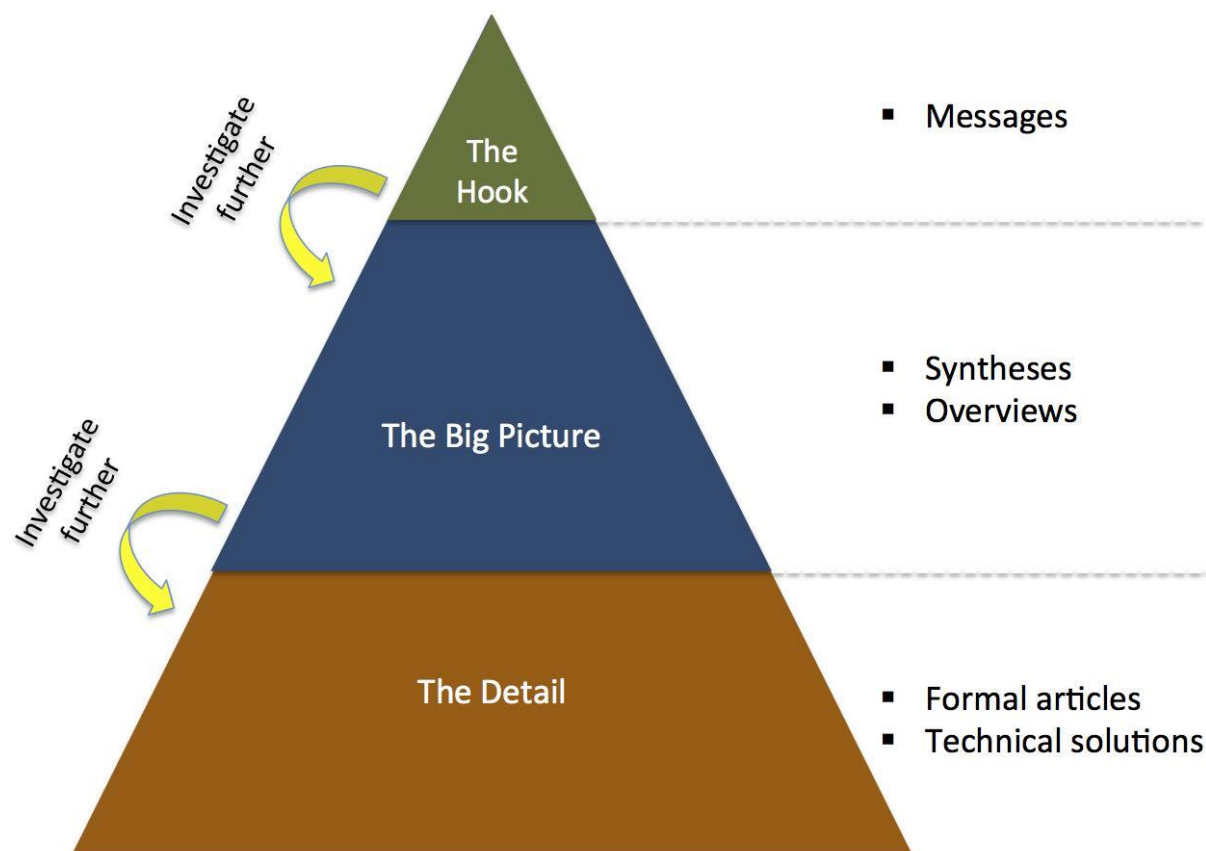
The role: to guide programmatic implementation in ways that ensure that research outputs yield positive development outcomes, and to ensure that programmatic knowledge is relevant, accessible and understandable.

The Process

The graphic below illustrates the ‘shape’ of the WLE Greater Mekong Communications Strategy. The strategy’s primary entry point is ‘the hook’, which focuses on messaging. Such messages are intended to generate sufficient interest in a solution that target groups want to find out more.

If so, they ‘drill down’ into the next level, where they can obtain overviews of the state of knowledge about a particular subject matter. The intent here is to provide the ‘big picture’, what is known and what is not, and why the matter is important.

If the ‘Big Picture’ level is successful, a target group will drill down further into the technical material generated by the programme’s research.



The Task

The WLE Greater Mekong Communications Strategy has two key tasks. The first of these relates to ensuring that programmatic outcomes are derived from the outputs it delivers. The programme will draw primarily upon its vehicles in order to achieve this. This process will be supported by: (a) strategic partnerships; (b) extensive regional and international networks; (c) the evidence-based knowledge it offers; (d) creating dialogue spaces in which its staff, partners, projects, and target audiences participate; (e) supporting its projects to engage with target groups; and (f) via its credibility as a reliable and trustworthy source of knowledge.

The second key task is ensuring that the knowledge generated by the programme is accessible, relevant to its target groups and understandable. Once again, this task is supported by this strategy’s vehicles.

The Vehicles

WLE has three primary vehicles, which are strategic implementation mechanisms by which we will generate the communications products and outcomes described above.

> *Dialogues*: for WLE Greater Mekong, dialogues serve to create the field into which new knowledge is planted. **Dialogue** allows actors to share perspectives and experiences on difficult, often politically contentious issues. Dialogue, under the premise of empathetic learning, dispels stereotypes, builds trust and enables people to open up to perspectives different from their own. Dialogue can, and often does, lead to both personal and collaborative action. **Deliberation** is a closely related process with a different emphasis - the importance of examining options and trade-offs to make better decisions. All projects in the WLE Greater Mekong programme are expected to contribute to the programme's dialogues.

> *Fora*: WLE Greater Mekong will develop multiple, politically neutral, spaces within which such dialogues will occur. These may be casual or more formal. In the latter case, these may be small, round table meetings, workshops or much larger regional fora, such as the Mekong Forum on Water, Food and Energy. They may also be on-line spaces (for example, chat rooms, blog posts, etc). In addition, WLE Greater Mekong will take advantage of fora implemented by other agencies and interests, aiming to contribute to constructive dialogue, networking and informed discussions. These may be international, regional or national conferences and events, or other fora designed to gather interests from the water development sector. Above all, WLE Greater Mekong aims to structure dialogue through novel methods of facilitation and negotiation with a view to obtaining consensus between potentially polarised interests and worldviews, and to reinforce its convening power.

To remain innovative and accessible to all stakeholders, WLE Greater Mekong will develop a communications platform named 'Mekong Citizen'. Its objective is to: 'to improve the dialogue surrounding Greater Mekong-related decisions through the creation of spaces, negotiation and facilitation'. Its goal is to foster a sense of belonging to the Mekong and the understanding that all basin residents have a role to play in improving and maintaining the management of the Greater Mekong for present and future generations, including its environmental integrity.

All projects within the programme are expected to actively participate in these fora.

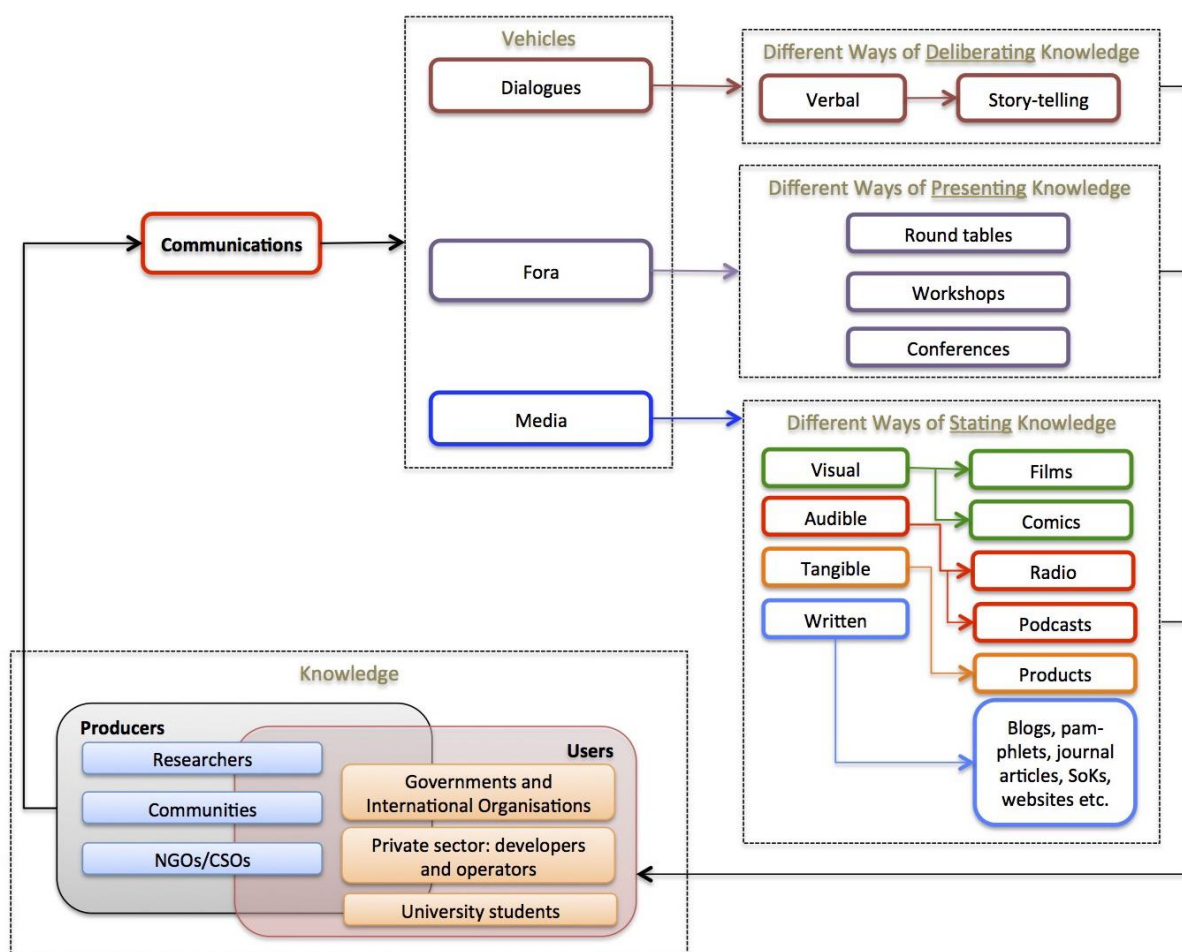
> *Media*: WLE Greater Mekong will develop four different types of media, all of which are channels to the program's target audiences. All of these function in the service of the overall programme. The first three of these will be run through Mekong Citizen; the last two will be run through the programme directly.

- Visual media – Film, including TV programming, stand-alone films, photography, comics and other printed media. Distribution channels include online platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Flickr, supported by traditional (offline) channels. These media seek to explain the problems WLE Greater Mekong addresses, the solutions it proposes, and why these matter.
- Audio media – Radio broadcasts and podcasts, delivered in English and regional languages, that address the same foci as visual media.
- Tangible media - WLE Greater Mekong will develop branded products in distinctive, eye-catching designs and formats, with the intent of creating influential visual saturation in communities. These products serve as additional channels through which to communicate with audience groups.
- Verbal media – Information, ideas and knowledge delivered through the spoken word – as story and/or anecdote - at workshops, conferences, round table discussions, and social, one-on-one interactions with members of the program's audience groups.

- Written media – Pamphlets, journal articles, newspaper articles, articles in popular literature, presentations, a website, and collective commons sites. WLE Greater Mekong, it should be noted, considers written media a lesser format to other media types, and in order to improve its potential impact, WLE Greater Mekong requests its researchers to publish in open access journals and/or regional language journals.

WLE Greater Mekong will focus on delivering outputs that are either copyright-free and/or accessible via the collective commons. Research published under the programme must be in open access journals (unless published in regional language journals) or copyrighted to be held in trust for open access and not-for-profit use. Through its own media and other international platforms, WLE Greater Mekong will ask its beneficiaries to engage in regional and international debates.

How these vehicles relate to each other is illustrated in the graphic below.



The Focus

Target audiences

Broadly, WLE Greater Mekong comprises knowledge producers, and knowledge users. Knowledge producers generate the knowledge that the programme (at all levels) will deliver to targets. They comprise the projects that WLE Greater Mekong commissions, and include researchers, communities, and CSOs and NGOs.

Knowledge users are those who the programme targets, and comprise those whose knowledge, attitude and skills the programme seeks to influence. These are (a) governments and

regional/international organisations; (b) private land and water developers; and (c) university students. Combined, the first two of these groups exert the greatest influence over the water and related land resources development sectors, and consequently merit concerted targeting. The third group is a subset of the regional youth, whose futures water and land development will shape, and who, by virtue of their occupations, have a desire and willingness to learn.

Changes will occur in both producers and targets, and these groupings are not mutually exclusive. For clarity, however, we focus on changes amongst target groups.

Government and international agencies

This audience comprises state electricity generating agencies, ministries of development, planning, environment, agriculture, forestry and/or water; as well as international agencies, particularly those who are involved in development, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the Mekong River Commission. Amongst the audiences that WLE Greater Mekong targets, this group has tremendous influence over the ways in which water and land is managed and developed.

Water developers and operators

This group comprises individual private companies and agencies who set out to develop, manage and/or operate dams, irrigation, plantations, and other water and terrestrial infrastructure. This audience exhibits great caution when it comes to engagement, which is rarely unconditional. Opportunities for engagement are perceived in increasing pressure within the sector to develop viable corporate social responsibility programs, the imposition of environmental and social safeguards by international development banks, and other protocols and guidelines.

University students

The youth of the Greater Mekong are a powerful source of change. WLE Greater Mekong targets students, for they stand to benefit from the knowledge that the programme generates. Because they are enrolled in university programmes, they are primed to learn, and therefore represent a willing, curious and interested group amenable to WLE Greater Mekong knowledge and outputs. WLE Greater Mekong will engage such students through its capacity building activities, input into the development of relevant curricula, through the fora it conducts, and other knowledge-sharing vehicles.

Behaviour: Knowledge, attitude and skills

Knowledge refers to the assimilation of information through learning. This is the information required to perform a task. The knowledge produced by WLE Greater Mekong is derived from the outputs that its research projects generate.

Attitudes are the established ways of responding to people and situations. Attitudes are learned based on beliefs, values and assumptions, and colour the ways in which new knowledge is received, interpreted and acted upon. Key attitudes that WLE Greater Mekong focuses on are: willingness to engage, willingness to consider alternative perspectives, ideas and approaches, the desire to find solutions to difficult problems, a willingness to attempt and experiment, and an ability to think critically.

Skill refers to the ability to apply knowledge. Skill encompasses experience and practice, and the gaining of skill leads to unconscious and automatic actions. Skill is more than just the following of rule-based actions. In the absence of knowledge and attitudes, skilled persons may have no ability or capacity to react to situations outside ‘normal conditions.’

Linking with WLE Global

The WLE Greater Mekong Communications Strategy complements the WLE Global’s [Engagement, Communication and Knowledge Management Strategy](#). Of the latter’s objectives,

the WLE Greater Mekong Communications Strategy in particular contributes to (1) A new discourse and engagement in global/regional for a, through it's focus of dialogues, dialogue spaces and fora. (2) Strategic Communication, and (4) Making information accessible, through the vehicles it deploys, the target audiences it engages, and Mekong Citizen.

WLE Greater Mekong communication and engagement team will link to and work with the WLE global program team and other focal region teams to transform knowledge into accessible products for use by different audiences and contribute to the overall knowledge base being developed by WLE.