

Highlights of the discussion

Communicating TVET

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This brown bag is part of a knowledge-sharing series that the DER Project Communication group regularly conducts for operations staff. Project leaders share practical lessons on how communication strategies can be designed to engage stakeholders, change behaviors, and mitigate risks to achieve effective project outcomes.

This brownbag was co-organized with the Education Sector Group.

This brownbag is intended to share project experiences on communicating TVET across different countries.

Speakers:

- Karina Veal, Senior Education Specialist, SDAS
- Karin Schelzig, Senior Social Sector Specialist, SEHS
- Sunhwa Lee, Principal Social Development Specialist, PAUS

Projects referred to during the discussions:

1. Timor-Leste:
 - The country has a large (52%) percentage of the population under 20, and youth unemployment is high; hence, capacitating the youth population with livelihood skills is an urgent concern for development
 - [Mid-Level Skills Training Project](#) (2012-2017)
 - Project cost: \$12 million; Budget allocation for communication activities including a communication specialist: \$420,000
 - Outputs: (1) Mid-level skills training provision; (2) Technical teacher training; (3) Enhancing labor market linkages (including TVET promotion and career guidance); (4) Strengthening TVET financing and support
2. Cambodia:
 - [Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project](#) (2010-2015)
 - [Technical and Vocational Education and Training Sector Development Program](#) (2014-2019)
 - Outputs: (1) Access; (2) Quality & relevance; (3) Industry involvement; (4) Governance
 - [Technical and Vocational Education and Training Sector Development Program – Additional Financing](#) (2016-2019) (same outputs)
3. Lao PDR:
 - [Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project](#) (2010-2016)
 - Outputs: (1) Quality; (2) Access; (3) Private sector involvement; (4) Governance; (5) Project management
 - (Proposed) [Second Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project](#) (2016-2020)
 - Outputs: (1) Upgraded teaching & learning environments; (2) Quality & relevance; (3) Access

Background on ADB's TVET portfolio

ADB's TVET portfolio is increasing – from 18% of the total education portfolio (2009-2011) to 42% (2016-2018). As developing economies require more skilled workforce with technical training, there has been growing emphasis on expanding TVET across many Asian countries.

While social acceptance of TVET programs is increasing, negative perceptions and stigma about vocational training are still prevalent among potential students and parents. Many TVET programs have used communication and social marketing to help promote the benefits of TVET and shift social and cultural attitudes about vocational training.

Common communication-related themes on TVET promotion

As ADB's TVET portfolio expands, education and TVET specialists raised basic communication-related questions to review the status of TVET promotion:

1. Are we communicating to share TVET project successes or are we communicating to help achieve TVET project objectives?

- Strategic interventions such as behavior change communication (BCC) can be used to shift public perceptions and behavior to help projects attain their objectives

Many of ADB's communication materials promote projects and their impact or successes. On the other hand, BCC and social marketing can help position and promote TVET courses and benefits to particular audiences to achieve project objectives (such as increasing the number of young people enrolling in TVET courses). BCC can contribute by promoting TVET programs as a response to young people's career aspirations and motivate students to stay in school until graduation.

People who influence potential TVET students can also be targeted for BCC approaches to shift social norms about vocational training. BCC can help swing the negative mindset of parents to perceive TVET courses as viable pathways to employment and entrepreneurship comparable with academic degrees. Prospective employers can also be targeted for social marketing to value the importance of TVET and provide inputs to improve TVET programs. This way, TVET graduates are matched with the right jobs that optimize their skills, and the content of TVET programs can be more closely aligned with employer needs. This will also increase the value of TVET and encourage potential students to enroll in TVET programs.

2. Is there genuine demand for TVET?

- BCC and social marketing can identify the audience segment where interest and demand are strongest, and channel this demand to convince audiences to act

With Asian economies growing fast, there is strong demand from employers for skilled labor. In many countries, skills shortages are perceived as constraints to growth. But while demand from employers exists, many young people do not see the benefit of undertaking a TVET course in improving their employment opportunities. Promoting TVET to increase enrolment is not only a communication function but also requires that TVET courses fill the needs of industries for new skills and knowledge, and are aligned with the career aspirations of young people.

In some areas, resistance to TVET can be traced to economic and political conditions. In Bhutan, for example, construction jobs provide poor pay and are seen as lowly because the only takers are migrants from other countries. In the Maldives, while the tourism industry is valued, insufficient numbers of young people enroll in tourism-related TVET programs because they are hesitant to work in the resorts, located on isolated atolls.

3. What are we promoting?

- Most TVET promotion efforts currently emphasize the course, not the resulting job

TVET institutions market their courses but do not promote the job opportunities available or positive images of careers that young people aspire to. In India, for example, while

TVET institutions promote courses in culinary arts, the traditional image of a cook is of someone who does the dirty work in the kitchen – washing dishes, chopping ingredients, etc. Shows like “Master Chef,” can change the image of a chef as someone who cooks but hews closely to the youth’s aspirations – manages or owns a restaurant with the monetary privileges attached to it, e.g., phones, gadgets, cars, houses, etc., and allow young people to see a positive career to which to aspire.

- TVET is often associated with negative images of certain trades and having menial work status

TVET is often positioned as an "alternative" to students who, for a variety of reasons, couldn't get into mainstream degree courses. The default clients of this alternative positioning are out-of-school youth, drop-outs, etc. This adds to the stigma attached to TVET courses and their students.

In Timor-Leste, the Youth Training and Employment Perception Study, which was conducted as part of the Mid-Level Skills Training Project (MSTP) to formulate a communication strategy, found that:

- Many people were unaware of the term, “TVET.” Though they had heard of “training,” the perception is negative and attributed only “for those who don't go to a university”
- Vocational education has been known as “Formasaun Profesional” but many didn't understand what this is or what TVET really means
- Respondents were unaware that TVET certificates can get them employed

4. What are we promoting and to whom?

- Market research is critical to knowing and segmenting the audience

Market intelligence is not just about gathering information about skills-job matches or the labor market demand but also understanding who TVET’s audiences are, their interests and concerns, and what they aspire to be. Market research allows segmentation to analyze how groups of people respond differently to products. Behavior change communication strategies are most effective when well-targeted, that is, different approaches are used for various audiences.

For example, market research results may show that there are various stakeholders of TVET programs – prospective employers, young people and those who influence the young people’s decision-making (i.e., parents / other family members, peers, etc.). Each of the stakeholders can be segmented further into groups of people, for example, young people can be either not interested in TVET, ready or who are already involved (i.e., enrolled in TVET programs or who influence enrollees).

Using this information, communication interventions can prioritize the “ready” segment by reinforcing the value of TVET, and providing direct support to enrollment. Communication approaches can also be provided to the segment who is already involved by reinforcing their decisions to enroll through highlighting the value and benefits, and using incentives or rewards. Audiences who are not interested can be

shifted to being aware of TVET through information dissemination and addressing the barriers to non-involvement.

- Market research results direct how communication approaches can be positioned and which channels to use to effectively reach different audiences

Using the results of its Youth Training and Employment Perception Study, MSTP in Timor-Leste developed a communication strategy to: (1) Inform target groups (i.e., youth, employers, TVET centers, TVET students) about the training opportunities and available employment; (2) Change public opinions about TVET; (3) Motivate youth to adopt new attitudes and career planning; (4) Educate employers and other stakeholders

- To do these, MSTP's communication approaches focused on:
 - Messaging that linked training (theory, practical skills) with work
 - Awareness-raising about "training" opportunities and the benefits of "accreditation" (finding immediate employment)
 - Conducting campaigns to match skills with interests and job opportunities
 - Using media channels preferred by the target groups: short films, TV and radio spots, comic strips (published in newspapers); social media awareness and support, signage (i.e., branding) for training centers, workshops for graduating high school students (especially for females), high-profile national skills competitions

5. In promoting TVET, do we invest in recruiting experts and go through systematic communication planning?

- Recruiting experts who can assist in systematic communication planning is a cost-effective investment

MSTP in Timor-Leste hired a Social Marketing and Communication Specialist to conduct a youth perception study and develop a TVET Communication Plan based on the study results, under close guidance of the project's executing agency, the Secretariat of the State for Professional Training and Employment Policy (SEPFOPE). The plan was evidenced-based and rooted in the local culture and context. Evaluation of the communication plan and implementation showed that 93% of the intended audiences were exposed to the campaign which led to an increase in TVET enrolment.

In Cambodia's first TVET project, social marketing was not prioritized and the team leader assigned the gender team (with limited resources) to come up with a social marketing strategy, including key messages and materials. Working without the benefit of a stakeholder mapping and research, the messages were suggested by the consultant team and government officials. One brochure aimed at parents and prospective students included a complicated flowchart explaining the equivalency and pathways of the Cambodian Qualification Framework. The complex message and visual were lost not just to potential students but to parents most of whom have limited educational attainment themselves.

The second TVET project learned from this experience and built in plans to engage a social marketing firm to go through the communication planning processes.

- Communication experts use research results to pretest approaches and materials to the TVET program's intended audiences (i.e., potential students, parents, prospective employers). Pretest results help guide TVET program managers to consider the audiences' preferences and interests over their own personal inclinations.

The STVET project in Lao PDR engaged an advertising firm (US\$450,000) to conduct audience research, develop and pretest communication materials. The prototype materials went through several iterations to suit the audiences' preferences and interest. Animated images were used on posters after pretesting with potential students showed that these were most attractive to them. Despite the results of research and pretesting for the intended audiences, the images were changed after government counterparts deemed that real images of people had to be used for the posters since animated characters were not serious enough.

6. What communication approaches are most effective to promote TVET?

- There is no one-size-fits-all communication approach as each TVET audience has different interests, stake and perspectives, and local cultures and contexts vary. TVET audiences also have different literacy levels, access to and preferences for communication channels.

Traditional communication approaches can be effective given easy access, acceptability and relevance to the target audiences. Additional financing for the TVET sector development program in Cambodia specifies the use of modern communication technologies in its social marketing campaigns. While modern technology is very effective in some areas, it may not work in others, and other approaches such as roadshows, community theater or other existing channels may be more appropriate.

Countries like Laos and Viet Nam have a network of village loudspeakers that may be effective in messaging. In Laos, stakeholder research showed the waning readership of newspapers among potential students and their parents – which the communication strategy included in the media mix. Despite this non-preference for the medium, newspaper ads were included in the TVET campaign because of their traditional acceptability.

7. How is gender mainstreamed in TVET communication approaches?

Gender-inclusive communication approaches are integrated in some TVET projects. These projects considered the analysis of women's particular needs and aspirations in the gender action plan (GAP) in their communication strategies. Some of the project GAPs included communication approaches that do not perpetuate stereotypes. The MSTP in Timor-Leste expanded its GAP by including female trainers in its construction training – which was not originally designed – and promoted high-performing trainees to become trainers, which in turn attracted more female students by providing role models in non-traditional female trade areas.

Communication lessons in TVET projects:

1. Communications is directly related to project outcomes. Investing in communications is a good project management practice to influence project objectives and sustain gains.
2. Recruiting and working with communication experts will help projects to conduct methodical communication planning and develop and implement effective strategies. Stakeholder research identifying interests, behavior and norms of the target audiences should serve as the bases for developing communication strategies and materials, rather than relying on traditional assumptions and preferences of project teams.
3. Project teams can consider new procurement methods to hire communication experts. The performance or output TOR can be used to allow communication firms or specialists to demonstrate their expertise in designing how outputs will be delivered, rather than having an ADB officer prescribe the approach and methodology upfront as in the conformance or input type TOR.
4. Communication approaches need not be technology-dependent. Based on the media preferences of the target audiences, communication strategies can optimize media mixes that include traditional communication modes for audiences without access to technology or electricity, or have low levels of literacy. The important thing is matching the selection of channels with audiences' media and communication usage habits, which should be identified through baseline research.

Suggested next steps:

1. Project teams can benefit from a toolkit to systematically integrate communication in TVET projects. DER's Project Communication Group and the Education Sector Group can work on developing this toolkit.
2. The Education Sector Group can explore the creation of a photobank where education specialists can contribute and use photos from their missions and other activities.