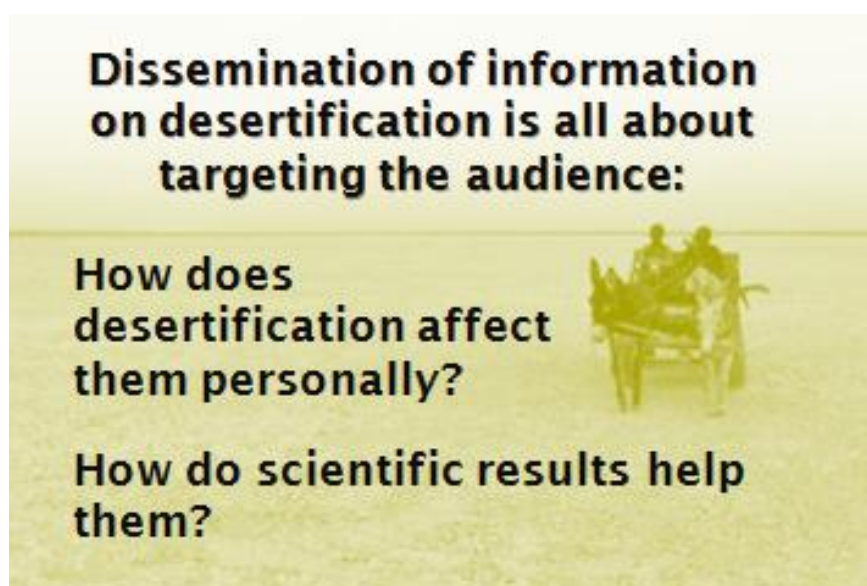# Harnessing the benefits of today's communication media:

lessons on sharing research messages from the DESIRE Project

The advent of the internet has made it much easier to share the results of scientific research with a wider range of audiences. Many scientific projects now host a website, but until recently few have exploited the communication possibilities to best advantage. The DESIRE Project (providing local solutions for global sustainable land management problems in drylands) has been large, international and interdisciplinary; and working to mitigate desertification by selecting and trialling sustainable land management practices with stakeholders. Therefore it has been very important to use a website, that includes a Harmonised Information System, to ensure that partners and stakeholders are able to understand the possible options for sustainability, and learn from one another.

Dissemination of information on desertification is all about targeting the audience:

How does desertification affect them personally?

How do scientific results help them?

The DESIRE project website http://www.desire-project.eu/ has included many useful features, such as a project brochure, a schedule of future meetings and events, some publicly downloadable dissemination products, and the latest project news. Project partners may log on to a password-protected part of the site where they can share non-public documents and deliverables, and use features such as automatic registration facilities for meetings.

However the bulk of the research results are presented in the Harmonised Information System http://www.desire-his.eu/ . Here, information can be accessed in non-scientific language according to the programme of research aims and also from the perspective of work in each study site. Interactive tools and video clips are among the features that are used to make the information as attractive and as accessible as possible.

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Organising the structure for knowledge management

The DESIRE Project has shown that information or knowledge management must be structured so that a wide range of users can access material of particular relevance to themselves as instantly as possible. The starting point is an analysis of the range of audiences. There is a big difference between providing "information" in general, and providing information in a structure designed to target a particular audience. Depending on the level of education or interests of the audiences, the information may need to be presented in different formats and styles of language. This may mean using scientific terms for researchers, more colloquial language for the educated general public, and more pictures and little or no text for the least educated audiences. Although English is the language of research it will not be understood by all other audiences, so translation facilities, either manually or semi-automatic on-line, are essential.

Stakeholders attending a DESIRE workshop in Crete

"The starting point is an analysis of the range of audiences"

The variety of audiences affects the choice of formats for information products, - in a range from a complex scientific paper in a journal to a simple pictorial poster. However, a critical question is: **what do people want to know?** People are most interested in information that is relevant to their job, or to improving their livelihood. For sustainable land management, land users are only likely to be interested in scientific developments if those developments help them in some way, particularly in a financial way. Therefore it is useful to highlight these features in any information management system.

Once the audience, or range of audiences has been determined they may be asked about their interests and existing knowledge. It is important to think carefully about how to respond: to provide the **R**ight **I**nformation in the right **F**ormat, also at the right **T**ime (the **RIFT** concept).

To do this we have to:
- make an analysis of who needs the information (**demand**)
- design a **structure** to house information in a logical way for easy retrieval
- optimise a mechanism to **share or exchange** information with recipients
- build in **flexibility** to rearrange the information content to respond to new information needs and to respond to demand

What research is of interest to apple farmers on the loess plateau, China?

# A checklist for planning information products

In DESIRE we have followed **8 steps** between identifying the audiences and providing dissemination products. More detail can be found in the DESIRE publication**: Manual of Communication and Dissemination** http://tinyurl.com/6pras6e

The **8 steps** are as follows:

1. Identify the range of stakeholder groups (**audiences**)
2. Identify the **complexity** of information required (will an audience appreciate scientific, simple, or mid-range material in non-scientific language?)
3. Identify the ideal **formats** for information that can be made accessible on-line (directly from an information system or from the choice of downloadable documentary and on-line formats, including leaflets, fact sheets, posters, video-clips, Twitter, etc.)
4. Choose the most relevant from all the **messages** coming out of the research tasks
5. Assemble **packages** of information. Material can be adapted for specific stakeholder groups

Research detail for scientists
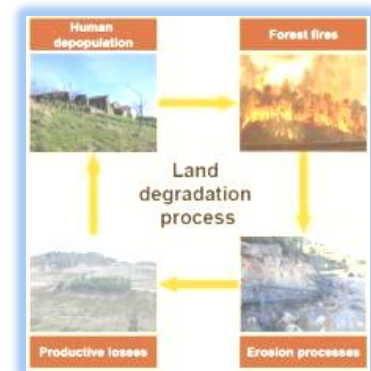
Pictures for schoolchildren

6. Determine what needs to be **translated** to local languages
7. Determine the best ways or **events** for dissemination to happen, e.g. exhibitions, community events, social events, conferences, TV or radio interviews, DVDs, etc.
8. Plan **timetables** to put these methods into action.

A **video-clip** presentation of these ideas may be viewed at http://vimeo.com/16466066

Booklets in non-scientific language

Round Table discussions with policy makers

Stakeholders are more confident to promote or try new ideas if they see evidence of success demonstrated in scientific experiments

Stakeholders cannot all visit the evidence for themselves, - but the evidence can be presented to them in attractive factsheets, booklets, policy briefs, posters, video clips, etc., - all in non-scientific language, and preferably in their native language

A selection of DESIRE dissemination products

The DESIRE Harmonised Information System

http://www.desire-his.eu/en/key-messages

On the on-line DESIRE Harmonised Information System the top menus allow users to access information from the perspective of each of 17 study sites, as well as the perspective of the research themes. The **Key messages** from the research themes are collected together so that summary information is easy to find. Some of the messages are organised according to type of audience, from the global UNCCD level to the local stakeholder level in DESIRE study sites.

There are lists of products under each heading. These documents may all be read directly on-line, using an integral scroll-down facility, or they may be downloaded for saving or printing. Some products are available in multiple languages.

Harnessing technology

In the Harmonised Information System new ways of presenting information in an attractive way are constantly becoming available. Here, clicking on the pictures on the web page leads to further information on each successive part of the research. In other areas drop-down menus help to organise information for each study site.

DESIRE has seen the benefit of the popularity of social networking, as on **twitter**

The publication of new dissemination products can be advertised to a continually growing public audience at the press of a button or touch of a screen.

The DESIRE Project has received many enthusiastic responses from land users, for example view a video clip from Botswana http://tinyurl.com/6wge8dr DESIRE research was also presented to a meeting of Botswanan national media. Mr. Abraham Mamela, Communications Manager at the University of Botswana complimented DESIRE and said:

"I must say, this is a quite stunning move towards communicating research, I wish most researchers had these skills that you have in your department/project. I have seen the videos and they are very informative to society. The technicalities are good, it was professionally done."