

RESEARCH PAPER

GREEN TALK

Saying it without Labelling it

The power of humble and educational communication in green MSD projects.



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Introduction

This research paper explores the successful communication strategies and tactics employed by Market Systems Development (MSD) projects focused on green and climate change mitigation. By combining desk research, social media observations, reports, and expert interviews, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis. The paper then analyses selected projects and concludes with recommendations for MSD practitioners, donors, and implementing organisations on how to use communication effectively to achieve strategic goals.

The literature on green projects and communication highlights the importance of effectively conveying sustainability initiatives to various stakeholders. Effective communication strategies are crucial for the success of green projects, as they help in building awareness, gaining public support, and ensuring stakeholder engagement¹. Studies have shown that clear and consistent messaging about the environmental benefits of green projects can significantly enhance public perception and acceptance². This involves not only traditional media but also leveraging digital platforms and social media to reach a broader audience.

Besides traditional development projects and initiatives, Market Systems Development (MSD)³ projects play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable economic practices and addressing environmental challenges. MSD approaches aim to create systemic changes in markets to benefit the poor and enhance resilience to climate impacts. These projects often focus on integrating climate-smart technologies and practices into market systems, thereby fostering adaptation and mitigation efforts. By engaging the private sector and leveraging market incentives, MSD projects can drive large-scale, sustainable changes that are economically viable and environmentally beneficial.

MSD projects contribute to climate resilience by addressing market failures and creating conditions for sustainable economic growth. These projects often involve partnerships with local businesses, governments, and communities to develop and implement climate-smart solutions⁴. For example, MSD initiatives may focus on improving supply chains for renewable energy products or enhancing market access for sustainable agricultural practices. By fostering innovation and investment in green technologies, MSD projects help build resilient economies that can withstand and adapt to climate impacts. This approach not only addresses immediate environmental challenges but also promotes long-term economic stability and growth.

The media's role in communicating green projects extends beyond merely reporting events. It involves framing the narrative in ways that can influence public attitudes and policy decisions. Research indicates that media coverage often fluctuates with political and economic contexts, affecting the consistency and depth of green project reporting⁵. Effective media strategies include highlighting local impacts, showcasing positive examples of green initiatives, and providing clear, actionable information. This helps in building a more informed and engaged public, capable of supporting and demanding robust environmental policies.

¹How Do Companies Communicate Sustainability? A Systematic Literature Review. Borges et al. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/10/8263>. Last accessed 1 June 2026.

²Greening crowdfunding campaigns: an investigation of message framing and effective communication strategies for funding success. [ScienceGate](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0950268824000000). Last accessed 10 November 2024.

³Market Systems Development Approach: A Brief Overview. [SDC, 2019](https://www.sdc.org/). Last accessed November 2024.

⁴Green(ing) Media (Studies). [mediarep.org](https://www.mediarep.org/). Last accessed 9 December 2024.

⁵How Do Companies Communicate Sustainability? A Systematic Literature Review. Borges et al. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/10/8263>. Last accessed 12 December 2024.

Finally, when communicating in MSD projects, including those focused on green transition, it is crucial to make a clear distinction between communication tactics and strategies that fall under communication for development versus communication about development.

Communication for Development (C4D) is a social process that leverages various communication tools and methods to facilitate meaningful participation and foster social change. This approach emphasises dialogue and the active involvement of communities in decision-making processes that affect their lives. C4D employs a mix of mass media, interpersonal communication, and community-based methods to amplify voices, build trust, and share knowledge. It aims to address power imbalances by enabling marginalised groups to understand, negotiate, and influence development initiatives.⁶

Communication about Development, on the other hand, focuses on disseminating information regarding development initiatives and their impacts. This type of communication engages stakeholders, policymakers, and the public to create awareness and foster support for development projects. It involves the use of various media channels to highlight success stories, share best practices, and report on progress. The goal is to inform and educate audiences about development efforts, thereby promoting transparency and accountability.⁷

The literature review highlights the critical role of effective communication strategies in the success of green projects. To address this, our methodology integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches, ensuring a robust examination of communication strategies in various contexts.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative desk research with expert interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of green MSD projects and their communication strategies in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and several countries in the Middle East.

Figure 1: Data Collection Process

For the desk research, the author collected and reviewed articles, reports, and social media posts related to green communication from the projects taken into analysis. These reports offered insights into the practical implementation and communication strategies of climate-related projects.

In the expert interviews, six interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including project managers, communication experts, and media professionals. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for in-depth exploration of specific topics. Annex 2 of this document contains a list of interview questions.

Name & Surname	Position	Project / Organization
Isaac Cowan-Gore	Project Technical Officer	Systems Change Initiative (SCI), International Labour Organization (ILO)
Aishwarya Pothula	Communications Consultant	Systems Change Initiative (SCI), International Labour Organization (ILO)

⁶Communication for Development: A Practical Guide. SDC, July 2016. [Available online](#). Last accessed December 2024.

⁷Ibid.

Name & Surname	Position	Project / Organization
Luljeta Progni	Media Expert	Freelance in Western Balkans
Sabin Selimi	Knowledge Management, Learning, and Communications Manager	RECONOMY Program, Helvetas
Irisa Veizaj	Project Manager	Rrjeti Erasmus Tirana
Gentian Kurti	Communications & Media Director	CVSA

Figure 2: List of Semi-Structured Interview Participants

For qualitative analysis, thematic analysis was used to identify and categorise key themes and patterns in media content and interview transcripts. In the comparative analysis, findings were compared across the case studies to identify commonalities and differences in climate change discourse and project implementation. The effectiveness of MSD projects in raising climate change awareness and education was evaluated.

All interview participants provided verbal informed consent. The confidentiality of interviewees was maintained by anonymising data, citing by name only those participants who agreed, and securely storing all research materials, protecting the privacy of participants and the integrity of the data. Strategies to minimise researcher bias were implemented, such as triangulating data sources and involving review of the document by The Canopy Lab in the analysis process, ensuring the reliability and validity of the research findings.

Mapping successful cases: how communication changes from national to multi-country projects

Project / Program	Social Media Presence	Traditional Media Appearances
Propcom+	Facebook 1,906 likes; LinkedIn 4,000 followers; YouTube 67 subscribers & 33 videos	Few appearances, event-based; more on dissemination of the event. Example: Propcom+ Engages Media on Farmers' Access to Agricultural Information – AgroNigeria
RECONOMY	Facebook 1,200 likes; LinkedIn 3,000 followers; Instagram 560 followers; YouTube 211 subscribers & 128 videos	Local partners have been promoted and made more prominent in media, to provide local ownership.
The Systems Change Initiative	LinkedIn 892 followers	Local partners have been promoted and made more prominent in media, to provide local ownership.

This section provides a mapping of three projects and programmes taken into analysis and their strong points in communicating about green. These three were selected because of their geographical scope and scale. Propcom+ is a national green-focused MSD project, whereas RECONOMY and SCI are regional and multi-country respectively. The paper can therefore provide

comprehensive recommendations for such scenarios. This approach also aims to enrich the analysis with a variety of communication cases.

Propcom+ communicates about climate and green initiatives through a variety of strategic approaches. The project clearly outlines its goals to improve incomes and climate resilience for vulnerable populations in Nigeria, and emphasises its commitment to sustainable agricultural practices that benefit both people and the environment. It places a strong emphasis on climate-smart agricultural interventions, including promoting sustainable practices that increase productivity, enhance climate resilience, and reduce emissions. Propcom+ communicates its efforts in specific Nigerian states, such as Kano, Jigawa, Kaduna, Edo, and Cross River. This localised approach helps in addressing region-specific challenges and tailoring interventions to local needs. Beyond agriculture, the project also tackles issues such as deforestation and sustainable land-use management in Southern Nigeria, broadening the scope of its green initiatives.

The project works through strategic market actors to implement its initiatives, and this is communicated to show how it leverages existing market structures to achieve its goals. Regular updates and detailed press releases help maintain transparency and keep the public informed about progress and impact. This ongoing communication builds trust and keeps stakeholders engaged. Overall, Propcom+ effectively communicates its climate and green initiatives by emphasising clear objectives, significant financial backing, gender inclusion, localised efforts, and a comprehensive approach to sustainability.

“Using terminology such as ‘green’ and its derivatives in communication poses an exclusion threat, as many people are not familiar with these concepts. Therefore, communicating in simple and concrete words provides for inclusion in communication as well.”

Sabin Selimi, KML & Communications Manager, RECONOMY, Helvetas

RECONOMY clearly outlines its mission to enable women and youth, including the most disadvantaged and excluded, to benefit from economic opportunities by increasing their income and securing decent and green jobs. The programme emphasises its commitment to inclusive and sustainable economic development across the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan regions, with a strong emphasis on promoting green and inclusive economic opportunities. This includes initiatives aimed at reducing pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and energy poverty, particularly through projects such as Empowering the Disadvantaged through Green and Digital (EDGD). RECONOMY communicates its efforts in specific countries within the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans, tailoring its initiatives to address local challenges and opportunities.

According to Sabin Selimi, KML & Communications Manager, the RECONOMY programme has not conducted traditional campaigns but has instead worked through market actors such as REDI Recycling, a Brussels-based initiative. The Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative (REDI) champions waste management in North Macedonia, creating a multiplier effect by involving Roma waste collectors. This approach aims to make this target group visible within the system. The initiative is transitioning from plastic to e-waste management, leveraging technology to enhance efficiency. Campaigns are conducted through REDI Recycling using videos on social and traditional media, tailored to the local context and languages, including Romani, and targeting both Roma and non-Roma communities.

Communication efforts have primarily targeted the general public, with a focus on the middle class, raising awareness about waste separation and providing solutions for the collection of separated

waste. Another video highlights the impact on the Roma community. However, a strategic review revealed that the language used is limited and must be more inclusive to achieve broader outreach. In Skopje, efforts have focused on central municipalities where awareness is lower and green talk often seems more relevant to wealthier individuals. Communication about development is primarily directed at donors through the RECONOMY website, while Communication for Development (C4D) is conducted with partners at the local level. The impact on beneficiaries is not yet measured, as the programme works through market actors.

“In addition to external communications, a flagship initiative of SCI and ILO is the ‘In-House MSD Network’. This network organises online or in-person meetings to discuss challenges in the implementation of green projects and how communication can support where applicable.”

Aishwarya Pothula, Communications Consultant, SCI, ILO

Finally, considering the communication of **The Systems Change Initiative (SCI)** for Productive Employment, led by the International Labour Organization (ILO), it is notable that it communicates its climate and green initiatives through a comprehensive and strategic approach. SCI clearly outlines its mission to drive systems change for job growth and improved job quality, emphasising its commitment to creating decent work and productive employment opportunities for the working poor, particularly through sustainable and inclusive MSD approaches. SCI places a strong emphasis on promoting sustainable employment through climate-smart and environmentally friendly practices, integrating MSD approaches to enhance job quality and productivity while addressing environmental challenges. SCI communicates its efforts both locally and globally, enhancing knowledge and capacity in the MSD approach for employment across various regions.

The project works through strategic market actors to implement its initiatives, leveraging existing market structures to achieve its goals. Regular updates and detailed publications help maintain transparency. Successful communication strategies often involve careful message framing to resonate with the target audience. For example, the SCI project effectively used online updates and regular news items to highlight the [Production and Commercialization of Indigenous Tomato Seeds for Ghana using a Systems Approach](#), making the concept more relatable to local businesses. Additionally, the use of diverse media channels — including social media, traditional media, and community meetings — ensured broad reach and engagement.

Finding the perfect blend: tailored solutions over one-size-fits-all approaches

This final section showcases the best practices identified through the research. The goal is to inspire other MSD projects and practitioners to embrace and implement these effective strategies. By highlighting these key points, the section aims to provide practical insights and actionable recommendations that can enhance the impact and success of green initiatives.

- **Saying without labelling — staying away from buzzwords and greenwashing.** Avoiding buzzwords and greenwashing is critical for maintaining credibility and trust. Projects should focus on clear, honest communication that accurately reflects their goals and achievements. By providing transparent information, projects can build genuine support and avoid the pitfalls of misleading or exaggerated claims. The potential for green initiatives is significant, but it is crucial to effectively ‘sell’ the idea — making it profitable for businesses and relevant for the future. For citizens, the focus should be on education and awareness.

“Communication in development projects sometimes feels too positive, trying to impress especially donors. I believe it should instead be humbler and impact-focused.”

Interview participant, anonymous

“It often feels that there is a tendency to impress each other through communication, but the real goal should be to engage the people. Communication for Development (C4D) can play a crucial role in this regard.”

Sabin Selimi, KML & Communications Manager, RECONOMY, Helvetas

- **Linking concepts and actors.** Connecting various stakeholders — such as market actors, community leaders, and policymakers — allows projects to create a cohesive strategy that leverages the strengths of each participant. This interconnected approach ensures all parties are aligned towards common goals, enhancing the overall impact and sustainability of the initiatives. As shown by all three projects above, and highlighted by Sabin Selimi, the role of an MSD project and communication officer should focus on being a facilitator to market actors, providing a platform for coordination and cohesion.
- **The importance of backstopping and internal communications.** As noted by Aishwarya Pothula, internal communication is crucial to promote work, achievements, and successes within multi-country initiatives or large organisations, especially for green-related projects. Backstopping and robust internal communications are essential for maintaining project coherence and efficiency. Regular updates and support from backstopping teams help address challenges promptly and keep projects on track.
- **Mainstreaming communications from day one for impact and upscale.** Mainstreaming communications from the outset is crucial for scaling up development projects, ensuring all stakeholders are consistently informed, engaged, and supportive. Despite its recognised importance, many communication officers feel this practice is not yet standard in the development community, due to factors such as limited resources, lack of integration in project planning, and insufficient recognition of the strategic role of communication.
- **The Western Balkans green narrative.** In the Balkans the green narrative is more favourable compared to the Caucasus, due to proximity to the EU and ongoing integration efforts, in the case of the RECONOMY programme. Awareness of the green transition is more pronounced, although it remains somewhat invisible as an immediate threat, except among young people who are influenced by social and visual aspects on social media.
- **Keeping dedicated channels.** In national projects such as Propcom+, the same channels are used for several audiences and purposes; in regional or multi-country initiatives it is helpful to keep a clear distinction between global and national social-media pages. National pages are mainly used for communication for development, while products on global pages are tailored to communicate about development. Dedicated channels help ensure information is accessible and that stakeholders remain informed and involved throughout the project lifecycle.
- **Localisation for success.** Localisation involves tailoring communication strategies to fit the specific cultural, social, and economic contexts of the target audience. By using local languages, addressing local issues, and involving local stakeholders, projects can enhance relevance and resonance, as proven in the case of the REDI initiative of RECONOMY.

Regionality is both an advantage and a challenge; understanding local aspects is crucial for achieving regional outreach.

- **The importance of small-scale, highly impactful initiatives.** Small-scale, highly impactful initiatives can serve as powerful examples of success and innovation. These projects often require fewer resources but can demonstrate significant benefits, making them easier to replicate and scale. In Lebanon, SCI successfully used communication as a means to educate and foster discussion between local companies and cold-storage facilities through roundtables. Although participation was voluntary, the impact was visible, as many companies understood the opportunity for doing business sustainably.
- **Using reliable intermediaries as channels of communication.** The SCI roundtables highlight the importance of reliable intermediaries. By leveraging their credibility and established networks, reliable intermediaries help bridge gaps, mitigate misunderstandings, and foster a more cohesive and transparent dialogue. This enhances the overall communication process and builds trust among stakeholders.
- **Capacitating journalists to educate on green.** Traditional media often focuses only on crisis reporting and lacks capacity, as there are few environmental journalists in developing countries. This highlights the need for capacity building in traditional media to improve environmental journalism.
- **Strategic communication interventions.** There is a clear need for strategic communication interventions in development projects. For instance, the RECONOMY programme's use of localised social-media campaigns in North Macedonia led to an increase in community participation in recycling initiatives. Similarly, Propcom+'s targeted messaging in Nigerian states resulted in the adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices. These examples illustrate how tailored communication efforts can drive meaningful change.
- **The undeniable power of storytelling.** Storytelling transforms abstract concepts into relatable narratives, making information more engaging and memorable. By weaving facts and data into compelling stories, projects can connect with their audience on an emotional level. Propcom+ effectively uses storytelling to highlight the impact of its initiatives — one notable example is the [Irri-Go model](#) launched in Jigawa State, Nigeria. This initiative, involving 43 clustered rice farmers, shows how the rent-to-own model for irrigation equipment has significantly improved agricultural productivity and resilience among smallholder farmers.

In conclusion, effective communication strategies are crucial for the success of green MSD projects. Tailored solutions that fit specific project needs and contexts ensure greater relevance and impact. This paper also provides the ground for further research and intervention in the field. Such observations serve as a reminder of why we do what we do, and help us avoid falling into the trap of daily operations and mechanical rationality. By focusing on effective communication strategies, we can ensure that our efforts resonate with stakeholders, inspire action, and contribute to a greener, more resilient future. Let us continue to tell our stories, connect with our communities, and drive forward with purpose and passion.

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Annex 1: List of analysed projects

Project title	RECONOMY – Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia)
Funded by	Sida
Duration	2020–2026
Website	https://www.reconomyprogram.com/
Green focus / goal	It aims to advance circular economy models through reuse, recycling, redesigning supply chains, and ensuring regulatory compliance.

Project title	SCI: Systems Change Initiative (multiple countries)
Funded by	Sida
Duration	2022–2025
Website	https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/systems-change-initiative-sci-productive-employment
Green focus / goal	It aims to propagate MSD practices for better job opportunities, in Moldova focusing primarily on childcare services.

Project title	Propcom+ – Nigeria
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Funded by	FCDO
Duration	2023–2030
Website	https://propcomplus.org/news/
Green focus / goal	It aims to improve income and resilience to climate change through the application of climate-smart agricultural models.

Annex 2: List of interview questions

1. Can you describe the main objectives of your current MSD project and its focus on green initiatives?
2. How does your project integrate communication strategies to promote its green objectives?
3. What are the key messages you aim to convey to stakeholders about the project's environmental impact?
4. Which communication channels (e.g. social media, reports, community meetings) have you found most effective in reaching your target audience?
5. Can you provide examples of successful communication campaigns or initiatives within your project?
6. How do you measure the impact of your communication strategies on stakeholder awareness and engagement?
7. What challenges have you encountered in communicating the green aspects of your project, and how have you addressed them?
8. How do you engage with traditional media when communicating the green aspect of your project?
9. In your experience, how important is stakeholder feedback in shaping your communication strategies?
10. What recommendations would you give to other MSD projects looking to enhance their communication about green initiatives?