Chapter 17
Public Participation and Information Technologies

Once the guidelines, reports, or documents have been produced, it is of the interest of the rural area to disseminate the results to the public. There are some documents that should remain private, such as the information given nominally, private information on for instance taxes or earnings, or social or personal preferences and large etcetera dictated by common sense. Whereas the database of a rural analysis/management project should not be considered public in any case, the reports and guidelines should be. It is therefore required to have this component in mind when writing the reports.

17.1 Effective Communication

While some parts of the reports might be very technical, an additional effort should be put to make the language accessible to any literate person. Pompous or verbose comments should always be avoided. This applies not only to English but to most other languages too: Latin-deriv languages such as Spanish or French allow a far more complex syntax than English, being prone to fool the reader with a nice empty shell. Natives of such languages should be aware of this fact and avoid rhetorical statements. In general, each sentence should convey an idea as simply as possible and sentences should be put one after another in a meaningful, related way. Vain phrases such as ‘a host of very complex dynamics might explain the process involved in this problem’ can only generate discomfort in the reader, who would like to know more about those dynamics to understand the problem.

The language should be kept straightforward, and ideas should be conveyed as simply as possible. This applies to any piece of scientific literature, but especially to public communication. Redundant or rhetoric sentences or comments must be avoided altogether. Also, it is advisable to hide the literary style of the writer as much as possible: the language of a a rural analysis report should be closer to a microwave oven manual than to a novel, and should also maintain the same standards that of a manual in terms of being revised over an over to avoid any misunderstandings or wrong doings, and to be widely understood.
Materials and ideas should be organized in clear, short phrases. Itemized structure helps to keep the text clean and to differentiate between different ideas. If two items are close enough to be potentially confused by the reader one of them should be either removed or indented.

Diagrams require a certain degree of education to be fully understood and therefore should be kept to a minimum. Pictures and images should be easy to grasp, and not complicated layered images. Regarding to maps, they have to be as simple as possible if they are intended to illustrate rather than to provide planning information. A map such as the one in Fig. 17.1 is simple enough to be read and understood by any person.

If the figure is a simulation or a model (Fig. 17.2), this fact should be made explicit. Statements such as ‘this image is not a picture but a computer-generated model’ are key, no matter how obvious it might seem to an educated person. The same applies for false-color combinations of satellite imagery.

Ideally, a good communication campaign should cover several levels of literacy and education. In the first level, the central ideas should be emphasized without using technical terms. The second level might involve some more specific information, with the third and fourth being more complex, specialized levels. In all the three phases information technologies can help to disseminate the work. Typographic and web design strategies exist to fulfill the basic requirements for effective communication.

The clarity requirement is not only a tenet of communication. In rural analysis and management, it can make the difference between receiving useful feedback or a large number of questions; or between engaging people in the process or drawing a line between the planners and the locals. Finally, telecommunications networks are