

Chapter 17

User Engagement for Sustaining Services



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17.1 Introduction

“Users’ Need First” was one of the significant lessons from the first phase of SERVIR-HKH. There was a disconnect between the cutting-edge technology products that were developed and the specific needs of the users. Thus, SERVIR-HKH needed a way to encourage and involve the users to actively collaborate during the development and rollout of SERVIR’s products. SERVIR Global then developed a service planning approach (SPA), shifting the focus from products to comprehensive services that put the users’ need first (Chap. 2). Service planning provides a framework for actively engaging the stakeholders and end users, starting from the design of the service to its delivery and adoption by the user. This approach to user engagement improves the quality of the services by addressing user feedback and also builds sustainability into the services from the very beginning.

User engagement has multiple definitions, and there is no single definition that covers the term entirely. Since the last two decades, the human–computer interaction community has become progressively interested in comprehending, designing for, and measuring user engagement with various computer-based features (Hassenzahl and Tractinsky 2006) involving education, gaming, social and news media as well as search applications. User engagement, in the corporate sector, is the degree to which the users find products, services, and processes that are interesting or useful. User engagement depends on the usability of the products and services, the look and feel factor, the usefulness of the information, the scope for interaction and participation of the users, and productivity that reflects the accomplishment of the user’s goals (Spacey 2017). Thus, user engagement considers the ability and capacity to engage as well as sustain the engagement (O’Brien

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et al. 2018). The engagement of the user is important because engagement and behavior are implicitly connected to the level of individual interest. For example, the more time a person engages with a product, this means he or she is interested in the product. The task of businesses is to find ways to improve user engagement and to ensure that the user spends more time with the product or service (CodeFuel 2015).

With the primary objectives to promote the applications of geospatial technologies and EO information, SERVIR-HKH works with diverse sets of users which include government agencies, development agencies, research/academic organizations, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and the private sector. For SERVIR-HKH, user engagement is a multifaceted, multi-stakeholder, and multi-country complex process with its challenges as well as opportunities. Systematic engagement with the users is important for a better understanding of the problems and developing solutions to address these problems. In this regard, partnerships with key stakeholders for co-development, ownership as well as for feedback from the broader stakeholders help in the sustainable impact of the services.

SPA (Chap. 2) recommends the engagement of various users in service planning discussions, starting with the identification of problems and culminating in the delivery of products, tools, and services. The user engagement strategy and approach were employed to guide the engagement with the user institutions in order to build long-term mutually beneficial relationships with each user.

This chapter aims to introduce the concept of user engagement in the context of SERVIR-HKH and its execution within the service planning framework; it also dwells on the lessons that have been learnt. The chapter also gives prominence to examples of user engagement case studies as well as to the tools and techniques that have been adopted for successful user engagement. It also describes the insights, achievements, and experiences during the implementation process of the user engagement module in the HKH region.

17.2 User Landscape of SERVIR-HKH

SERVIR defines users as “individuals or institutions that consult SERVIR data, products or tools to fulfill a particular purpose. They can be analysts or decision-makers who are often responsible for communicating to beneficiaries” (Chap. 2, Service Planning Toolkit 2017). The users include mandatory line agencies on the thematic areas such as government ministries and departments, meteorological agencies, and census bureaus; academic and research organizations such as universities and research centers; and larger stakeholders such as sub-national offices, extension agents, NGOs, media, relevant donor-funded projects, private-sector associations, and cooperatives. These users can be divided into three main categories: primary users; secondary users, and end users. Below are the descriptions of each of these categories of users.

Primary users

Primary users are organizations with institutional mandates to collect, analyze, and generate data or make policy decisions in a particular service area. They are usually government ministries and departments with which non-binding agreements have been signed, namely: memorandum of understanding (MoU) and letter of intent (LoI). In the case of SERVIR-HKH, while MoUs were signed with ministry-level governmental agencies of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, LoIs were signed with the relevant departments of government agencies, academic institutions, and international development organizations working in these countries. Primary users are the immediate users of a service and are in a position to support the uptake and enhance the development impact of the service by usage and dissemination. SERVIR-HKH collaborated with these users right from the stage of scoping and needs assessment.

Secondary users

The second category of users comprises organizations that are part of the constituency of primary users; they are expected to use the services to support their decision-making process but are not directly involved in data generation or analysis. In this regard, formal agreements with SERVIR-HKH may not be established. However, they are associated through certain service-level activities in terms of reviewing service products, providing inputs for improvements, and also using the products. SERVIR-HKH works with these users directly or through the primary users. These secondary users are in a position to support the uptake and enhance the development impact of a service via usage and dissemination.

End users/beneficiaries

The third category comprises those who will benefit from the use of the services by the primary and secondary users. SERVIR-HKH tries to ensure innovative approaches for enhancing products and services uptake with the end users. End users could also be representatives from under-represented audiences, especially those marginalized by gender, geography, or by access to technology; community-level agencies; researchers; private-sector entities; and identified or potential users, including individuals who are not directly involved in the design process. Their needs and expectations are addressed to the extent possible through the inputs of the primary users who are mainly responsible towards these users. Though these set of users may not have been consulted during the product development process, they are critical in achieving the intended impacts from the service. Thus, through service planning as an inclusive process, creating and delivering customizable solutions to the end users are envisaged in the longer term.

17.3 User Engagement Strategy

The diversity and landscape of the users are constantly changing and this has an impact on how to keep the users engaged. In this context, innovative engagement strategies, plans, and methods are required to be proactively more reachable, inclusive, and versatile than ever before (IGIF 2018). There are a set of processes to ensure that the services and products respond to the needs of the users and/or create new needs. The services and products that SERVIR-HKH develops are intended to support informed decision-making and are to be used by agencies to serve their needs. Therefore, it is important not only to engage the users but also to co-create the products with the users. Each user has his or her own individual priorities, ways of working, and systems, depending on the constituencies they serve. The co-creation process entails open discussions on these priorities and the ways of working in alignment with the product features, user interface, and to ensure that there is a sense of ownership among the users with a greater likelihood of the products and services being used effectively. Therefore, an engagement approach was adopted for a meaningful and fit-for-purpose user engagement and adds value to the products and processes with more connect and sense of ownership.

SERVIR-HKH has in place a comprehensive User Engagement Strategy. This strategy serves as a guiding document for systematically engaging the users through close interactions and has helped in fostering understanding among SERVIR's national, regional, and global partners. This has also helped in the users being at the forefront of technological innovations and has enhanced the value of the products to the users, thereby ensuring that the products are used more appropriately. Furthermore, the strategy explains the user types, levels of engagements, and the tools and techniques that are to be used in developing appropriate platforms for sustained upscaling and enhancement of product uptake.

The User Engagement Strategy is a general plan to achieve effective service-level user engagement at different phases of service planning and design, and to ensure that the services and products are co-designed and co-implemented with the partners. This strategy of SERVIR-HKH is composed of two main parts: the user engagement approach; and the user engagement cycle which includes related activities that can strengthen user engagement.

17.3.1 User Engagement Approach

The user engagement approach of SERVIR-HKH has been adapted from the partnership module of the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA, www.partnershipbrokers.org) which is based on internationally recognized principles, frameworks, and partnership cycles. The approach is grounded in the key principles of diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit, and courage (ICIMOD 2017).

Diversity means that all the users will have different ideas, unique expertise, knowledge, and institutional culture, which should be embraced for creating new values and innovations. For SERVIR-HKH, it is very important to acknowledge these regional diversities and variations that each user brings, and to use them to build on effective user engagement with the aim of creating new values.

Equity means that all the users are treated equitably, that their voices are heard, and their contributions are valued. For SERVIR-HKH, this means that all the users in the region, irrespective of their size, have an equal right to be heard and to contribute. It means that SERVIR-HKH and the users will each contribute to the partnership from their areas of competence and strength, and will respect and uphold each other's commitments. Where genuine equity exists, the users are much more likely to value and respect each other's contributions.

Openness refers to enabling an environment of transparency. SERVIR-HKH's practices are open and honest in their dealings with the users; they do not intentionally withhold information and they make decisions based on dialogue and mutual understanding. It is all too well known that transparency plays a vital role in building trust, which, in turn, ensures accountability among the users.

Mutual benefit recognizes that different users may be involved in projects/initiatives for different reasons, but all of them are striving towards achieving the same goals. For SERVIR-HKH, it is important to be able to discuss and recognize each user's individual reasons for being involved and ensure that these are met. When mutual benefits exist, there is a greater possibility that the users will continue to engage and look for solutions even in difficult situations. Thereby, services are likely to be much more sustainable.

Courage refers to encouraging users to work together more closely in areas of uncertainty in order to achieve breakthrough results. Equipped with the courage to confront challenging situations and take the user into confidence, SERVIR-HKH will be able to take up new innovations and approaches that can add value to the overall objectives.

17.3.2 User Engagement Cycle

The user engagement cycle (ICIMOD 2017) has been designed along three key stages. The cycle follows a step-by-step process with a series of practical guidelines and procedures for developing, managing, and maintaining user engagement (Fig. 17.1). Each of the steps indicated in the cycle are explained below as well as the related activities.

i. Needs Assessment

Stakeholder mapping and consultations

The major activities during the needs assessment phase were stakeholder mapping and holding stakeholder consultation workshops. An important aspect of

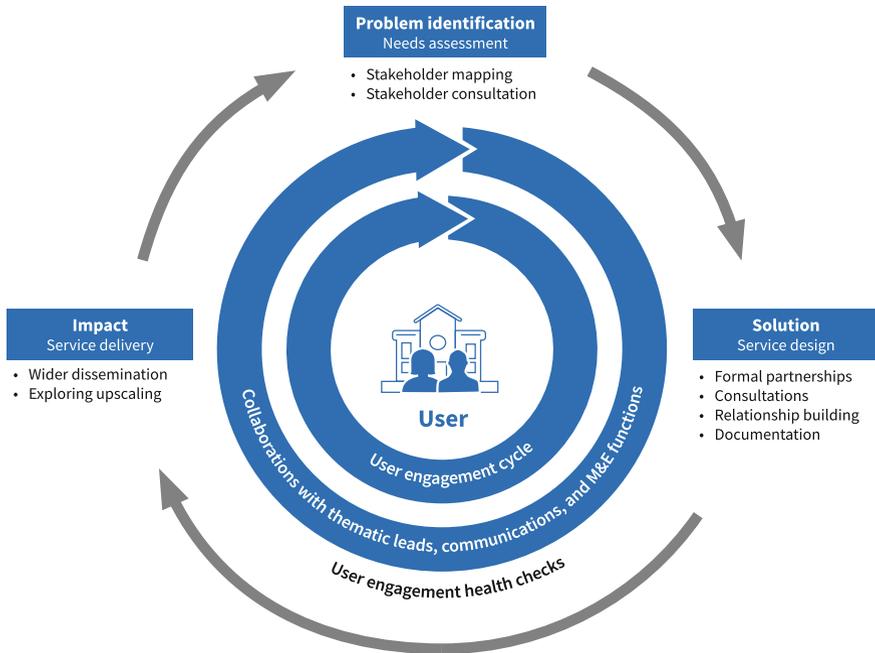


Fig. 17.1 User engagement cycle and activities

stakeholder mapping from the SERVIR perspective is to understand the flow of information, mandates, and functions. As explained in Chap. 2, stakeholder-mapping exercises are conducted in order to understand the user landscape for a particular service area. The stakeholder-mapping exercise helped in the identification of primary and secondary users and beneficiaries. This initial approach entailed scoping and identifying the users through consultation workshops conducted in each country on the relevant thematic areas. Through these exercises, the identification and assessment of potential users, along with their needs, existing gaps, expectations, and possible contributions, were discussed. This exercise involved a wide range of stakeholders in each service area in the target countries. This proved effective in mapping the relevant set of users for further engagement with SERVIR. The workshops were consciously designed to create an environment of open discussion, exchange of information, and negotiations; these also helped in creating a better understanding among the SERVIR-HKH team and its potential partners about the activities that were to be undertaken.

Thus, even if a potential partner had the mandate in a particular service area, there was the need to align goals, objectives, and interests between the potential partner and SERVIR-HKH. In this regard, there were some pertinent questions to be taken into consideration: what would be the complementary contribution of SERVIR-HKH; is there a duplication in effort; and, is the organization willing to

take the ownership of the service and continue in a sustainable manner? Then, capacity assessments of the potential partners (Chap. 3) were carried out to identify their capacity-building needs in terms of human resources, data-generation/sharing policies and practices, and the mandated services provided to the end users.

ii. Service design

During the service design phase, user engagement involved a number of activities that included establishing formal partnerships with the primary stakeholders, holding consultation workshops for users' orientation and feedback, carrying out regular interactions for strengthening relationships, and preparing documents.

Forming partnerships

In the context of SERVIR service planning, the primary and secondary users that were identified were mainly government ministries, departments/subnational offices, and other relevant organizations. The discussions with these government agencies veered around co-developing the applications with support mainly for technology transfer and capacity-building activities. Thus, to develop a sense of ownership and strengthen the commitment of these primary users, partnership instruments such as MoU and LoI were designed. The signing of such an agreement helped in building a strong partnership—keeping in mind the principles of equity, transparency, and mutual respect. The MoU was signed for agreement on broader areas of institutional collaboration, while the LoI was a non-binding partnership instrument without financial obligations to either organization in order to establish strategic alliance in the areas of mutual interest, especially in the areas of knowledge sharing and research. The overall agreement outlined the alliance in joint activities and listed out the complementary values that each partner would bring to the partnership. The partnership instruments thus expedited and formalized the processes of user engagement and also helped to outline mutual commitment and responsibilities. The partnership landscape of SERVIR-HKH in terms of the service areas is presented in Fig. 17.2.

Consultation workshops for user orientation and feedback

Focused service-wise workshops were conducted in each country for orientation and discussions on the methodologies, outputs, and design aspects of the products and services. The workshops were tailor-designed to initiate discussions and to brainstorm in order to have clarity on the co-development of the service products. Discussions were also held on ToC and the User Engagement Strategy and approach. These workshops helped to create a common understanding among all the stakeholders so as to facilitate better and effective exchange of ideas and knowledge, and to get feedback on the service design. The workshops also contributed to strengthening the SERVIR network and presence in the member countries and fostered collaboration in the implementation of the activities. Overall, these workshops helped the SERVIR-HKH team to arrive at a better understanding about its roles and responsibilities as well as about the expectations of the users and thereby agree on a set of joint activities.

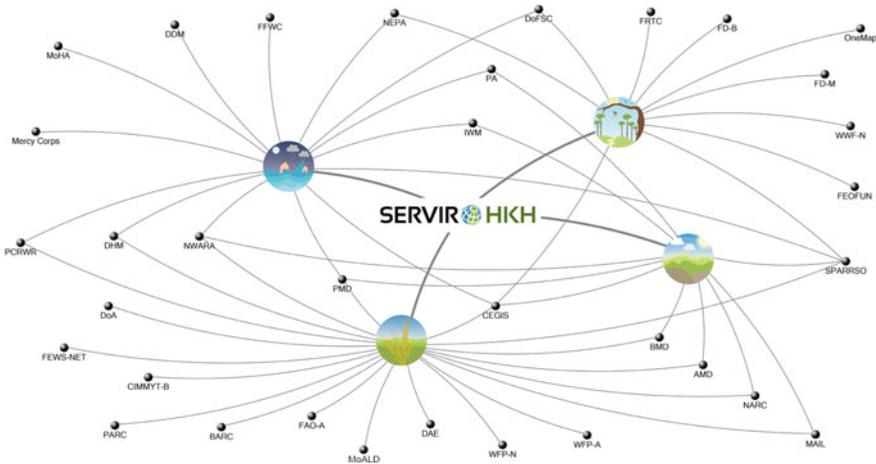


Fig. 17.2 Consolidated user landscape according to **a** service area, **b** country. *Note* Afghanistan Meteorological Department (AMD), Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD), Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC), Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organization (SPARRSO), Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT); Department of Agriculture (DoA); Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE); Department of Hydrology and Meteorology (DHM); Department of Forests and Soil Conservation (DoFSC); Department of Disaster Management (DDM); Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET); Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)-Afghanistan; Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC); Forest Department (FD); Forest Research and Training Center (FRTC); Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN); BUET—Institute of Water and Flood Management (IWM); Institute of Water Modelling (IWM); Jahangirnagar University—Institute of Remote Sensing (JU-IRS); Kabul University (KU); Local Government Engineering Department (LGED); Mercy Corps (MC); Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL); Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development (MoALD); Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA); National Water Affairs Regulation Authority (NWARA); National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA); Nangarhar University (NU); Nepal Agricultural Research Council (NARC); Practical Action (PA); Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD); Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources (PCRWR); Pakistan Agriculture Research Council (PARC); World Food Programme (WFP); World Wide Fund (WWF)

Relationship-building interactions

Relationship-building activities were conducted with potential partners and users through meetings and discussions, followed by negotiations and planning with these organizations for mutual consent, and finally developing an appropriate partnership instrument/agreement to formalize the partnership. It was important to lay emphasis on the fact that each of these organizations added value and that there would be clear benefits for these organizations; it was also emphasized that there would be minimal institutional risks and that the overall aim was to aid effective decision-making and support the stakeholders.

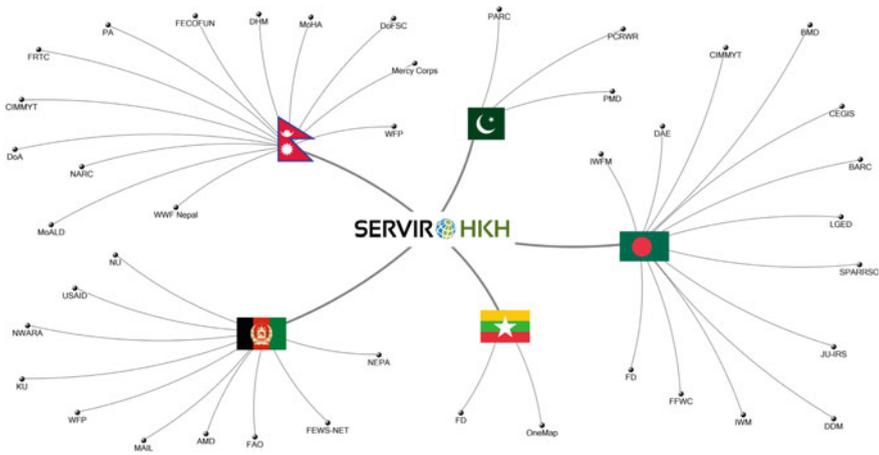


Fig. 17.2 (continued)

From the very beginning, SERVIR-HKH focused on strengthening its engagement with the users to establish mutually beneficial partnerships instead of just an alliance for building a product. Therefore, the focus was on having open communication through regular meetings and interactions with the users. The purpose of the meetings was to get to know each other better, discuss mutual interests in terms of the overall objective of SERVIR, to understand individual benefits, explore the value-addition aspect, and clarify on the expectations and contributions. This process provided an ideal opportunity to help build a strong partnership through the principles of openness, mutual respect, and courage to accept the unknowns of complex partnership issues to boldly address them for achieving breakthrough results.

In the case of ongoing partnerships, these meetings reviewed the progress and follow-up actions so as to evaluate whether the targets had been achieved. At the end of each meeting, the briefs of the discussions were shared with all the participants. All of these interactions helped in arriving at a better understanding about the problems, challenges, and opportunities. This means of acknowledging successes and failures will help pave the way for better planning of the future course of action.

Documentation

Documentation is not merely about recording the evidence of activities but also about references that can help in tracking and updating the activities. As part of an effective user engagement process, SERVIR-HKH has focused on proper documentation of key user engagement activities, such as in the form of workshop reports, meeting summaries with key action points, and agreement papers. It goes without saying that good documentation makes it easier to track the progress of a particular activity and helps in following up on updates on each service product.

iii. Service delivery

Wider dissemination and uptake

Once the services segment was completed, dissemination workshops were held for the wider user community. Also, there was a seeking of additional partners and potential beneficiaries who could take up the services and ensure their sustainable use. Multi-stakeholder workshops were also conducted in order to extensively disseminate the service products and to strengthen user engagement for wider adoption and use of the services. Aligned with the service planning approach, the objective of these workshops was to work together with the users and a wider range of stakeholders, thereby enabling the sharing of the various SERVIR-HKH service products and also building awareness. The workshops also helped ensure that the services and products were of interest and that there were potential beneficiaries who would use and upscale these products. Besides, the workshops and learning sessions were platforms for sharing experiences and ideas. This provided a great opportunity for cross-learning among the users.

The final set of workshops also hoped to receive feedback on the sustainable use of the service products beyond the sphere of SERVIR-HKH and on constructive inputs for the next phase. An important objective of the meetings and discussions was also to explore potential for outscaling and uptake from a wider range of relevant stakeholders, including professionals and researchers from government agencies, the private sector, academia, NGOs, and other institutions engaged in providing similar services. The process also considered the interest and engagement of the users beyond the life of SERVIR-HKH. Besides, the dissemination workshops and interactions with the users sought how to increase user engagement and capacity building, keeping in mind the aspect of gender and social inclusion as per the mandate of ToC. Targeted communication products were also designed and distributed to increase the outreach and visibility of SERVIR-HKH in the region and beyond.

17.3.3 Crosscutting Activities

Integration with service support functions

As part of the user engagement process, close integration with the other service support functions was equally important. These functions included monitoring and evaluation (Chap. 18), the aspect of gender (Chap. 15), communication (Chap. 16), and capacity building (Chap. 14). Thus, the user engagement process ensured that these functions were in sync with the service planning approach. This was executed through an integrated approach while designing and conducting workshops and training events with the users; there were also regular internal meetings to share progress/updates and discuss the challenges. The institutionalization of the user

engagement process at the service level was undertaken with all the primary users of SERVIR-HKH as the activities were co-implemented in each service area.

User engagement health check

As part of the strengthening of the user engagement process, reviews were also conducted on the state of this engagement process. These health checks were not standalone activities but were strategically integrated into the national and regional workshops with the users, focusing on a specific product or a service area. These were part of an annual process to review the user engagement procedure and the overall experience. This helped to ensure that all the users understood each other's difficulties so as to address them in the best way possible. The key questions that were asked were: how is the user engagement proceeding; what has worked well and what has not; what needs to be done differently; and, what can be collectively done to address the problems, if any?

These health-check exercises were basically in the form of half- or one-day workshops with modules of user engagement discussions/group exercises to not only discuss and resolve any issues but also to look at the benefits and costs of such engagements and what could be changed to make them more effective and efficient. An annual health check was also conducted for each of the service areas. Besides, discussions were held on identifying the areas that needed revisions. At these discussions, the users expressed their opinions on the need for improvements; they stated that there should be more frequent feedback and that there should be a review of the implementation timeline for the co-development and co-implementation processes based on emerging needs. Some of the major recommendations then became part of user engagement agreements. These health checks were an unusual exercise for the users, but much appreciated. Similarly, as part of the strategic review and planning process of SERVIR-HKH, a SWOT analysis was conducted involving all the primary users. These reviews facilitated a close working relationship with the users and helped in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the overall engagement process. While the health checks were more focused on improving engagement with each user, the SWOT analysis was more focused on an overall review of SERVIR-HKH.

The extent of engagement with the primary, secondary, and end users varied as the roles were different. Figure 17.3 shows the intimacy matrix for different users based on the closeness of relation r as well as the level of engagement. This matrix came about after a consultation process with different users (Chap. 3). "Intimacy" here refers to the intensity of the engagement with the users. While SERVIR-HKH ensured that all users were duly consulted, the intensive procedures of co-design, co-creation, and co-implementation were undertaken with the primary users. The matrix was created to develop an understanding about the different levels of users and about the opportunities to engage with them. This matrix provides a clearer understanding about each type of user and the strategy required to engage with each one of them.

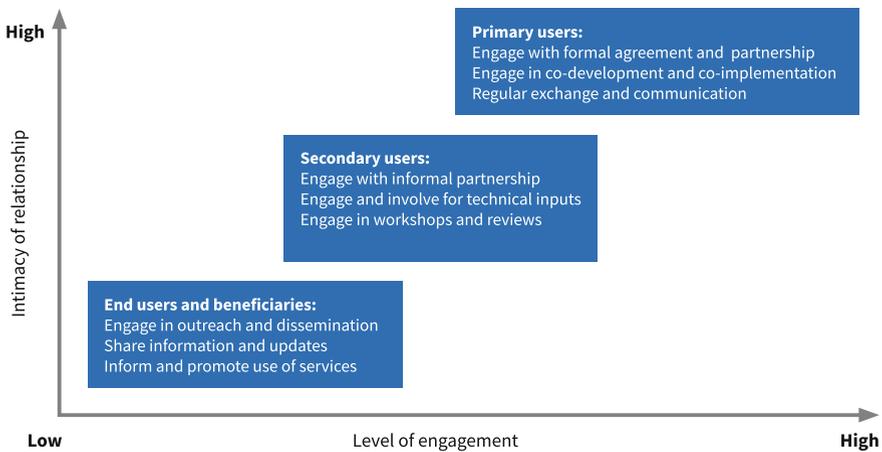


Fig. 17.3 User intimacy matrix

17.4 User Engagement Experiences from SERVIR-HKH: Key Takeaways

In the decade-long implementation process of SERVIR-HKH, user engagement has evolved significantly from the first phase to the second phase. Although SERVIR-HKH started with stakeholder consultations and capacity needs assessments, a systematic user engagement approach was only adopted in the second phase with the development of the service planning approach for use across the SERVIR hubs. With this approach, there has been a significant focus on sustainability and ownership of the services. SERVIR-HKH has been successful in building more sustainable partnerships by establishing formal collaborations where there's a clear agreement on the roles and responsibilities of all those who are involved.

The following section encapsulates the achievements, challenges, and lessons of the whole SERVIR-HKH experience.

Effective engagement within the internal team

The complexity of SERVIR-HKH lies not just externally but also internally between the various teams of experts that provide technical and service support functions. Since SERVIR-HKH works on areas ranging from agriculture, ecosystems, and water resources, to disasters and weather and climate, there is involvement of multidisciplinary professionals in service design and delivery. Moreover, capacity building, gender equality, and monitoring and evaluation are key components of each service. Therefore, regular meetings, internal communications, team-building workshops, and other such exercises were part of the process to strengthen the overall SERVIR-HKH team. Such exercises helped in developing a

common understanding and bringing uniformity among the SERVIR-HKH team members while interacting with the partners. They also helped to increase the team synergy and efficiency because of better coordination.

Every user has its own strengths and challenges

When a service is successfully implemented with a user, it doesn't mean the same will happen with the others as well. Each user has its own set of unique issues and strengths, and therefore, the engagement should be focused on addressing the problems and complementing the strengths. Mechanisms such as SWOT analysis, scoping, and consultation workshops are helpful in understanding these aspects. Having the "right" or "fit-for-purpose" partner is critical, so a lot of effort has to go into the selection of partners. This means following the due diligence process that involves scoping and identifying the users through stakeholder mapping, consultations, and needs assessment. All of these help in forming a better understanding about the users and their capacities, and about their interests as well as expectations. SERVIR-HKH used these processes and they were really helpful in getting to know about the perspectives of the users in terms of the challenges, opportunities, and their level of satisfaction. By knowing more about the users and their expectations, the path became smoother in co-developing and co-implementing the services.

Deepening the engagement

For an initiative like SERVIR-HKH or a similar one that focuses on co-design and co-development, it is important to lay emphasis on continuous and close engagement with the users. This requires constant communication, consultations, and meetings. Also, there should be formal agreements (whether legally binding or not) with the users, especially when it comes to working with government users wherein the bureaucratic structures often cause the transfer of some key focal persons; without any written agreements/documents, it is often difficult to follow up on a project once the focal person gets transferred. This also means redundancy in terms of sharing information and it even can bring a project to a standstill. In such situations, having an agreement is really helpful in that it reminds the focal person about the agreement and the commitment he or she had made. However, it is important to draft this agreement in a way that it not only reflects the obligations but also the roles. SERVIR-HKH has had such agreements with 15 users and these were instrumental in building a common understanding and clarity about mutual expectations.

It is also important to understand that negotiations take time. SERVIR-HKH spent a good amount of the initial project period to identify the key implementing partners and to negotiate on possible collaborations. These negotiations can be time-consuming and frustrating at times, especially with government agencies that have their own processes and procedures. It took over two years with one of the partners in Nepal and three years with another partner in Bangladesh to sign MoUs with SERVIR-HKH. However, this is a very important step to bring mutual clarity around the roles and contributions from all the engaged users, and the collaborations with FRTC and BMD are seen as successes of SERVIR-HKH.

Thinking together and clarifying expectations

Co-design and co-implementation demand a lot of collective effort on the part of the stakeholders and users, especially when the applications are to be ultimately owned by the users; so, a lot of effort and resources need to be invested on consultations, meetings, and workshops. During the implementation phases of SERVIR-HKH, a lot of such physical and virtual events were conducted. And through this constant process of communication and sharing of experiences, there came about a clarity on the expectations, thereby increasing mutual trust in the partnership. It is also important to understand that partnerships will be successful only if there is mutual benefit. SERVIR-HKH often received one common question from most of the users: “What will we get out of this partnership?” Working together and exploring benefits from partnerships are really important to maintain consistent interest among the users. This was possible with the implementation of the engagement approach and the engagement cycle, which really helped in forging partnerships. This also helped in developing a common understating and clarifying expectations from each other. The key principles of diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit, and courage helped the partners to engage and communicate in a more effective way.

Unique situations with partners

SERVIR-HKH works in five countries, mainly with the mandated government agencies as the implementing partners. The engagements in these different countries are also guided by varying policies, institutional setups, human resources, and IT capacities. Therefore, a single approach is not suitable for all kinds of partnerships, and the engagement process with each of the partners requires specific considerations. What is more important is the development of a broader strategy and work around each separate partnership. The patterns of user engagement may come across as unpredictable and unexpected at times. A case from Afghanistan is worth mentioning here. Afghanistan’s MAIL is a key partner of SERVIR-HKH. Following the initial needs assessment process, wheat-area mapping was expressed as a priority of the country and SERVIR-HKH was requested for its support. Responding to the need, SERVIR developed a methodology together with NASA for in-season wheat mapping using both optical and SAR images on the GEE platform. During the co-development process, SERVIR-HKH trained the MAIL staff on the methodology and the tools. However, by the time the results were being finalized, the official mandate of wheat mapping was transferred from MAIL to the National Statistic and Information Authority (NSIA) and all the staff trained by SERVIR-HKH left MAIL to join other institutions.

Investment in human resources

It is ultimately the human resources who will be ensuring the quality of work and helping to deliver, and it has no substitute. Therefore, it is always critical to invest in human resources and improve their capacity and skills. Particularly in the case of SERVIR-HKH, which is heavy on science and technology, it is important to ensure

that the human resources have the required knowledge and are on par with the updates. The higher the level of ownership and satisfaction among the human resources, the higher the effectiveness and innovations in the implementation of a project. In this context, SERVIR-HKH accords high priority to training the staff of the partner organizations, especially via on-the-job trainings. This has been an effective and rewarding process as the capacity of these staffs has been enhanced and now they conduct such trainings to other beneficiaries independently. One such impact was when SERVIR-HKH conducted a training on “Remote Sensing & Geographical Information System for Water Resource Management” to representatives from Kabul University. Subsequently, the professors from this university independently conducted this training to a wider group of beneficiaries in Afghanistan; this was also included as part of a course in the university. While such an approach builds the confidence of the staff on the use of tools and technologies, this also helps in building inter-personal relations among partner organizations and SERVIR-HKH.

Project is what partnership delivers

Often, while implementing projects, the focus is around output, outcome, and successful closure. In that process, very often, one tends to forget that the success of a project depends on the success of partnerships. Right from the beginning, enough attention should be paid to selecting the right user, establishing good relations with the user institutions, and then managing and maintaining these relationships. It's ultimately mutual trust that delivers a successful project.

Learn to listen to “no” and say ‘no’ when needed

One of the lessons learnt has been that one has to be prepared to listen to negative feedback from the user. Partner institutions may not always agree with all the procedures of a project; they may even walk out of the project. So, it's important to be prepared for such surprises and work around a thorny issue to find solutions or alternatives. At times, it is also important to say “no” when the user expectations are beyond a project's mandate. For the sake of transparency, saying “no” is equally important as saying “yes”, but both have to be backed up with the right reasons.

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