



PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION

When the beginning defines the ending

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Assessing the value of participatory communication is a complex and difficult task. This, however, cannot become an excuse for giving up the search for appropriate methods, nor become a discriminating factor for negating the evidence of its value.

The challenges faced by practitioners in the field of development communication have changed significantly in the last decades. Despite an increased recognition of the value of development communication, too many managers and decision-makers still fail to understand and consider the range of concepts and practices of the field. Several among them consider development communication only as a mere application of the common communication methods and media in the development context. This implies that communication is taken into account only after projects and programs have started, only to disseminate information or persuade audiences to change specific behaviors.

The boundaries of the field of development communication have expanded considerably in the emerging paradigm, to include more two-way and participatory features, which were too often neglected in the past. In this article, I will focus on the value of participatory communication and on how such value can be demonstrated.

To be addressed effectively, the issue of assessing participatory communication should be framed within a broader understanding of development communication and its approaches and applications, which can be considered as divided in two main modalities or modes: monologic and dialogic. The first one is associated with the diffusion thread of communication approaches, characterized by mostly linear one-way models. The second one is associated with the participatory thread, based on two-way horizontal models.

Communication interventions associated with the monologic mode can be assessed quite accurately, since they usually address changes in awareness, knowledge, attitude and, ultimately, in behaviors. The key requirement in

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order to evaluate their impact is to design and carry out a baseline study at the beginning of the intervention, which will in turn be compared with a baseline at its end¹.

Once other possible intervening variables are taken into account, the difference between the pre- and post- assessments will provide a measure of the impact of communication. Naturally, to be accurately measured this difference should take into account other intervening factors that cannot be ascribed to the planned communication initiative. Such factors could have either negative (e.g. a natural disaster shifting priorities) or positive effects (e.g. a unexpected event related to the issue in question), and such effects should be considered and taken out of the equation to assess the impact of the original intervention correctly.

Prior evaluations of communication interventions linked to the monologic/diffusion mode have led to a number of success stories in specific instances. However, such instances have not been systematically tracked or documented. In any case, communication approaches of this type, even if useful to support many kinds of project activities, do not address what in the literature has been identified as one of the key causes for the many failures of development initiatives: i.e., the lack of local stakeholders involvement in their definition and implementation.

The raising importance ascribed to participatory approaches by international development organizations reflects the consensus on the need to change former development practice. If people's participation is becoming a key ingredient in development initiatives, communication should follow the same path, as there can be no participation without genuine communication. Clearly, we are not referring to monologic communication but to the dialogic mode, which helps open up spaces of dialogue among the various stakeholders and facilitate their participation. Dialogue is needed in order to build trust, ensure mutual understanding, explore different perspectives and identify the best course of action to successfully address a situation that needs to be changed.

For the purpose of this article, impact assessment is concerned with dialogic communication: i.e., the specific application of participatory communication as an assessment tool at the beginning of a development initiative. In order to use communication at its best and address effectively the need for an empirical research approach that would provide voices to relevant stakeholders, the staff of the World Bank's Development Communication Division (DevComm) has developed a method combining the monologic and dialogic modes. When called in to investigate a project or program situation, DevComm staff adopts a research method known as the Communication-Based Assessment (CBA), which incorporates the commonly used Communication Needs Assessment (CNA) within its scope

rather than substitute it.

To be able to evaluate the investigative, participatory and analytical value of participatory communication used in this context, is important to understand the difference between communication-*based* assessment and communication *needs* assessment, which is not purely semantic. Typically, the function of a communication needs assessment is to investigate all issues related to communication, such as the media environment, media laws and policies, information networks, communication needs and institutional capacities. Instead, a communication-based assessment uses communication methods and approaches to engage relevant stakeholders in the investigation of all issues considered important beyond the communication dimension.

Communication-related issues are of course explored in a CBA, but in conjunction with other issues of relevance, in order to ensure constructive collaboration among stakeholders, assess risks and opportunities and provide valuable inputs for project design. CBA is a research approach that uses the dialogic and crosscutting nature of communication to investigate issues, giving local stakeholders an active role and a voice, necessary to prevent problems and to enhance project design. Clearly, at the base of a CBA there should always be a two-way communication model, considered a key solution to address the major causes of past failures; i.e. insufficient or lack of people's active involvement in development initiatives.

To convince decision-makers and be successful in advocating for the adoption of such an approach, one needs to present hard data that demonstrates the value of using participatory communication to involve local stakeholders. Not an easy task, considering that the outputs of a CBA usually constitute the inputs for project design. How to measure the weight of such inputs is not an easy task, since before it reaches a stage in which it becomes visible and measurable, their impact is combined and diluted with a number of other variables. An additional obstacle derives from the fact that, if proper communication (i.e. dialogic) is carried out with relevant stakeholders, and their voices and points of views are taken into account, this often leads to the prevention of misconceptions and misunderstandings that could result in conflicts and controversies.

Hence, communication helps to prevent conflicts and problems that could cost more time and imply a waste of resources. But how can something that is not happening be accurately measured?

Without falling into the constraints posed by the “positivist-scientific framework”, which demands that everything in the social realm be

accurately measured to prove its value, there are at least three basic ways to assess the value of participatory communication in this context. The first one, “anecdotic evidence”, refers to those instances where there is clear evidence (either due to a strong correlation or to a causal link) that problems, tensions and other obstacles have been solved thanks to communication. Such evidence is not readily available for most projects, but when accessible, it can be rather effective in making the point.

The second way to assess the value of dialogic communication, “impressionistic evidence”, provides stakeholders with the opportunity to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a project’s accomplishments. While not exactly within the strictest scientific parameters of evaluation methodologies, such an approach is possibly the one most in line with the participatory perspective, since it measures success as perceived by the ultimate “beneficiaries.” In this way, concepts difficult to operationalize and evaluate within a strict scientific methodology, such as participation, transparency and empowerment, become more easily assessable as the stakeholders define them in ways that they considered suitable to the specific context.

The third and last way, “the costs of non-communication evidence”², highlights those instances -more frequent than one may imagine- where a project encountered problems or failed to achieve its objectives due to lack of dialogue with the stakeholders . Precise data about the amount of money and other resources wasted because of not listening to the stakeholders’ voices are not always easily available. Evaluating such costs requires that organizations commit to full transparency and acknowledge their mistakes.

However, there are instances where such transparency has been practiced. In a recent event organized by the World Bank, a major company involved with a hydroelectric project estimated that lack of proper communication with the indigenous populations led to conflicts and controversies that caused delays of over twenty years and extra costs of about 278 million dollars. That company is now working in a collaborative mode with those populations, which has resulted in more efficient and effective operation.

Assessing the value of participatory communication as an instrument to engage stakeholders and enhance project design is not an easy task, especially if the parameters for measuring the impact are taken from the mainstream framework of quantitative methodologies. However, it is even more difficult not to acknowledge the many failures that can be ascribed to the lack of this vital type of communication in the preparatory phases of development initiatives (even if the measurements available to date are not precise).

The complexity and difficulties of this task cannot become an excuse for giving up the search for appropriate methods to assess the value of participatory communication, nor can they become a discriminating factor for negating the evidence of its value.

1 Post-intervention baseline can also be repeated in time in order to assess the long-term effects of a communication intervention.

2 This concept was first introduced in a presentation given by DevComm at the IUCN congress in South Africa in 2003.

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