



COMMUNICATING AS ONE?

A look at the past and future of the UN's Communication for Development Round Tables

Peter da Costa



Communication for development has been on the United Nations agenda since the 1960s. As head of UNDP's Development Support Communications Service (DSCS) from 1967 to 1975, Erskine Childers advocated relentlessly for the UN's integration of communication as a tool for effective programme delivery. His six-point plan called for motivation of the public, education of UN project staff, enhancing inter-governmental coordination in developing countries, providing communication training for communication staff, commissioning and disseminating relevant applied research, and for the UN to pay more attention to project-level communication support.

It was in the wake of Childers' tenure at DSCS that the UN Inter-Agency Round Table on Communication for Development emerged in 1986 as an informal mechanism for UN agencies and their partners to exchange ideas, share experiences and foster collaboration. The idea was that the Round Table would take place every two years, convened by different agencies on a rotating basis, and organised around a specific theme. The discussions in the first few round tables echoed the ideological debate between diffusion-based and participatory approaches.

At the time, there was no common UN system definition, and it was only after the UN General Assembly ordered an evaluation in 1994 that the agencies began to engage seriously on how to better coordinate communication efforts. The evaluation recommended that the round table process, hitherto ad hoc and informal, should be regularised and involve all UN agencies. A UN General Assembly resolution was subsequently passed in 1995 ^[1] requesting the UN Secretary General, in consultation with the Director-General of UNESCO, to report to the General Assembly every two years on the implementation of the Round Table.

A second resolution in 1996 stressed "the need to support two-way communication systems that enable dialogue and that allow communities to speak out, express their aspirations and concerns and participate in the

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decisions that relate to their development” [2]. This was the first time the UN system, at the highest level of policymaking, had articulated a common vision of communication for development. On paper, the text was very much in line with the emerging –even if contested- primacy of participatory approaches aimed at amplifying voice and situating communities as the key agents in their own development.

The UN text reflected the hard-won gains by academics and practitioners in the battle of ideas over which approaches were best able to tackle poverty and disempowerment of the world’s marginalized. Communication became a two-way process. Furthermore, and as emphasised by Servaes [3], the notion of participation was deepened by the emphasis on community access, so much so that that messaging-based diffusion models have largely given way to participatory approaches that focus on community empowerment and social change.

In this spirit, the second generation series of round tables, held between 1996 and 2004, have tackled a range of issues – rural development, social change, HIV/AIDS, evaluation, and sustainable development –, providing a strong evidence base to support arguments in favour of the UN system taking communication more seriously.

The last edition, held in Rome in 2004 and convened by FAO, highlighted a number of old and emerging challenges that threatened to blunt the fight to end poverty, and called for stronger collaboration inside and beyond the UN. These included inequality of income and opportunity, seen as an effect and symptom of globalisation; the promise and threat of information and communication technologies; the need to integrate communication in development planning and implementation; and the need to demonstrate communication’s impact and value-added to development.

So far so good. In practice, however, the reality is that communication for development is practised, to varying degrees, by only a few agencies. FAO has a long track record of harnessing communication in rural agricultural settings, though at the moment there are concerns that it is in the process of disinvesting in this area. UNICEF, once the main exponent of programme communication, has in recent years focused on fundraising communication and external relations, although there are signs that under new leadership it is beginning to privilege programme communication once again.

Under Mark Malloch Brown, UNDP’s Communication Office became an external relations machine, working with celebrities to raise the agency’s profile and relegating development communication to the sidelines. There is evidence that this is changing, with the UNDP’s Oslo Governance Centre pioneering communication for empowerment approaches. UNESCO, which should lead the

system, has been unable to attract the resources required to match its mandate. The picture is much the same with other arms of the UN system. The UN Department of Public Information, the biggest organizational unit in the UN Secretariat, reflects the system-wide tendency towards top-down diffusion-based approaches.

Although most agencies work broadly on information and communication, there are fundamental differences, with each narrowly focused on its own mandate and agenda. Agencies are also much more likely to collaborate with non-UN partners than within the system. Yet, when the time comes to report to the General Assembly, the agencies use the occasion to cluster a host of disparate activities under the communication for development umbrella, while promoting their narrow mandates and approaches.

On the ground, communication is not effectively integrated in the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), the common strategic framework for operational activities of the UN system at country level. The same is true of national poverty reduction strategies (PRSs), the principal strategy for halving poverty by 2015 – a key Millennium Development Goal (MDG). As has been argued, despite a strong emphasis in the PRSs on participation, “poor public understanding, limited public debate and low levels of country ownership threaten successful implementation of this strategy” (CSFC et al 2004).

This lack of coherence and coordination is a system-wide problem, and one that subsequent waves of reform have tried to address in the last few years. While central planning is much improved, the ‘Delivering as One’ vision Kofi Annan leaves as his legacy is still a long way off. The UN presence in developing countries remains fragmented in a crowded terrain of development actors. Annan’s High-Level Panel ^[4] recently warned that the UN system’s current design “risks perpetuating a myriad of niche players, which individually will not have the influence and authority to secure a strong voice in national and global debates”.

So, where does this leave the UN and communication for development? Advocates within the system are quietly hoping that the 10th Round Table, to take place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 12-14 February 2007, convened by UNESCO, will find ways to get everyone on the same page. The theme of the meeting, *‘Developing a UN system-wide common approach to communication for development in view of achieving the Millennium Development Goals’*, has been selected in the hope that the MDGs, which each agency has signed up to, will provide a basis for stronger collaboration.

The 10th Round Table’s objectives are bold. It will seek to increase joint inter-agency collaboration at international (headquarters) and national (UN country

team) levels; strengthen awareness within and among UN agencies on ways in which the impact and effectiveness of communication for development can be measured; and introduce mechanisms to harmonize communication for development programming approaches within the UN system. The idea is for agencies to leave Addis Ababa having signed onto the idea of a common framework of principles and activities, to be policed by future round tables and a beefed-up reporting mechanism.

Sceptics believe the agenda is too ambitious and unachievable in the immediate term. They argue that the in-bred territorialism of the agencies may scupper any chance of doing anything that achieves critical mass, with a more incrementalist approach likely to result only in limited collaboration and in initiatives that will fail to achieve the scale needed for real impact to happen. There are also concerns that the 10th Round Table, intended as a UN-focused event, will exclude some of the leading communication for development players, even those closely involved in the recent World Congress on Communication for Development (WCCD). This is a matter of some irony, given that many of the recommendations in the WCCD's outcome document, the Rome Consensus, are very similar to those emanating from the 2004 Round Table.

The Round Table's organisers remain optimistic, insisting that there has never been a better opportunity than now to sell communication for development to the system and find ways to integrate it into the UN's ways of working. What is clear is that strong leadership, as well as committed resources, are needed to take whatever comes out of Addis Ababa forward. The question is whether the agencies can set aside their ideological, programmatic and methodological differences and harness communication for development as a tool towards making the UN system more relevant to the needs of the world's poorest.

Peter da Costa has worked extensively in Africa as a journalist, manager, UN communication adviser and consultant. He is now pursuing a PhD in Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. 146662@soas.ac.uk

[1] UN General Assembly Resolution 50/130 of 1995.

[2] UN General Assembly Resolution 51/172 of 1996.

[3] Servaes, J 1995. Development Communication: For Whom and for What?, in *Communication*, 21(1): 39-45.

[4] United Nations 2006 *Delivering as One – Report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment*, New York.



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