



WHAT DO THEY THINK? POLICY-MAKERS AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

A Perception Study Conducted in 2005-2006

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The study "What do they think? Policy-Makers and the Role of Communication for Development" is a follow-up to a similar survey conducted in 1994. The purpose of this 2005-2006 study was to assess whether there have been significant changes in the perception of Communication for Development among decision-makers in multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, in national governments and in major NGOs. In addition, the study strives to identify whether there have been notable changes in the human and material resources committed to this sector.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present survey interviewed 44 high-level individuals. Whereas all the interviewees of the previous survey on Communication for Development were from multi- or bilateral development agencies and national governments, the current survey included a few interviewees who were less directly involved in development work. Nevertheless, these individuals were high level decision makers with a broad understanding of development issues.

There has been a notable shift among policy-makers over the last twelve years. The 1994 survey revealed that, because of a lack of proof of the cost effectiveness of Communication for Development, its inclusion in projects was difficult to justify. Today, the majority of respondents strongly agree that it is economically justifiable to include communication in development projects and programmes. In addition, the perception among the majority of respondents suggests that organizations are likely to sustain and/or expand the use of communication in their operations. This is probably because of the increased attention being given to promoting stakeholder participation in project design, operation and evaluation. Very few respondents mentioned that their organizations had a formal policy in favour of stakeholder participation, but even without such a policy, its importance now appears to be entrenched in the minds of those

concerned with development, whether in international agencies or national governments.

According to those surveyed in 1994, a shortage of funding was not the most important obstacle to adopting Communication for Development in programmes and projects. The present survey reconfirms this perception although it shows a gradual change among policy-makers given the increased awareness of the usefulness of development communication. A principal challenge remains - how to effectively allocate and manage the available resources for Communication for Development and ensure its systematic integration in development programs. A few respondents emphasized the need for flexibility when devising Communication for Development strategies; they need to take into account the cultural, political and social realities of the context in which they are to work.

The apparent confusion between Communication for Development and the wider understanding of communication in general underscores the fundamental need to reshape the language and terminology in Development Communication, making the distinction clearer and more accessible to the beneficiaries and non-practitioners.

This survey also underscores the need for more competent specialists in Communication for Development. This is dependent upon the greater institutionalization of Communication for Development courses and studies within the academic realm and within the training programs of multilateral and bilateral organizations, NGOs and other entities involved in the sector. Pure journalists and media producers are seldom suited to this work because they have a different set of skills and responsibilities and because it perpetuates the idea that Communication for Development “is done by PR people”. Furthermore, there is a need for greater interaction between communication specialists and the technical specialists managing projects and programs. Communicators must immerse themselves in the subjects they are working on in order to go beyond excessively conceptual strategies and focus on what is actually required and is achievable through communication.

The results of the recent survey also reveal numerous similarities with the 1994 survey. However, the most important difference is the present confusion between the term Communication for Development – broadly described as communication within the context of development programs and projects – and “communication” as it is commonly used today; for in effect, it has largely replaced the terms “public affairs”, “external affairs”, “public information”, and “public

relations". The catch-all words "communication", or "communications", now frequently covers all of these.

The fact that "communication" encompasses so many areas appears to be a major factor in the lowering of the profile of Communication for Development, hence causing significant confusion and undermining its true meaning. Even the interviewees who made the clear distinction between Communication for Development, on the one hand, and public information and public relations on the other said the term "Communication for Development" was ambiguous and open to misunderstanding. Even so, virtually all of the interviewees considered communication to be important, whether they were thinking of its use in public information, advocacy, mobilization, or in development projects. Many identified how their agencies had significantly shifted towards using more human-centered development and participatory strategies, with an emphasis on communication.

Only a small number of interviewees noted that their organizations had a policy on participation. However, even without such a formal policy, the importance of stakeholder participation is now firmly entrenched in the minds of those concerned with development.

The strategies and methods being used to generate stakeholder participation vary, but the majority are based on interpersonal and group communication. Some interviewees expressed doubts about their success in achieving true participation, despite the fact that most of them claimed that their institutions were somewhat or very successful in obtaining stakeholder participation in projects. One cause could be a lack of the special communication skills required to set up and facilitate good participatory discussions.

The use of media is strongest in the health sector, but it is mainly related to group work at the community level. Only two development agencies mentioned having set up community radio stations as part of their programs. The need to use media as much as possible in an interactive way was stressed.

All of the interviewees' organizations were using communication in one or more forms. Agencies mainly working at the policy level to bring about changes globally or nationally were primarily concerned with communication for advocacy and mobilization. Importantly, the majority of interviewees were able to identify successful projects and programs in which Communication for Development had made a key contribution.

The issue of whether human and material resources for Communication for Development had increased or not since 1994 was unclear. Certainly, there were more people working in communication, but many of them were involved in the public information domain. Two agencies that had very successful Communication for Development programs in the 1980s and early 90s had, for internal reasons, reduced the resources and importance given to the work. On the other hand, another agency that had never been involved in Communication for Development had quite recently created a 30-person strong division to handle it. Only one agency, a bilateral one, appeared to have completely mainstreamed Communication for Development in all of its sectors of work.

In this 2005/2006 survey, as in 1994, the main obstacles to the widespread adoption of Communication for Development formed the key part of interviews. The obstacles identified were similar to those identified in the earlier survey, but their order of importance had changed. The first two obstacles reported below were mentioned in many interviews: a) A lack of awareness and understanding of Communication for Development, and the lack of a clear definition of it. (This scored last in the 1994 survey); b) a lack of competent individuals working in the field and lack of communication specialists with a real understanding of development issues. There is a need for people with the ability to think strategically and create practical communication proposals. This was also in second place in the 1994 survey.

All of the interviewees who knew and understood Communication for Development expressed their full support for including it in development programmes and projects, and this was often despite negative comments about the quality of available communication specialists. As could be expected, different perceptions and opinions were often expressed about many issues covered in the survey, but there was a clear consensus about the overriding importance of interpersonal/group communication in achieving stakeholder participation in programmes and projects.

BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY

In 1994, a similar survey, financed by UNICEF and WHO, was conducted among 40 high-level people. The purpose was to find out how decision-makers viewed Communication for Development, thereby creating a better basis for communicating with them in the future. The interviewees included: ten people from national governments in eight countries; 25 interviews in eight multilateral development agencies; and five interviews in two bilateral aid agencies. In summary, that 1994 survey revealed the following:

- Most decision-makers were well aware of the role and importance of Communication for Development and had an overall understanding of the concept of communication activities within development programmes. However, a number of respondents believed that the term “Communication for Development” left room for confusion and misunderstanding, with the word “communication” itself being very broad.
- Most development agencies and governments stated that they aimed for increased participation in the planning and conducting of their programmes, but, in general, they felt that they were not succeeding to the extent that they would like. The use of participatory approaches was perceived by many as being difficult and time-consuming.

The *main obstacles* to the greater application of Communication for Development, in order of priority set by the number of interviewees who mentioned them, were considered to be as follows:

- Lack of evidence of the impact and cost effectiveness of communication made it difficult to justify its inclusion in projects and programmes.
- Lack of competent communication people. There were plenty of media people available, but few with skills in planning and applying strategic communication within development programmes.
- Although the importance of Communication for Development was understood and stressed by many decision-makers, its image and *modus operandi* were unclear. It was a vague and untidy sector, encompassing many things, and therefore it was difficult to get a grasp of it.
- The attitude of middle-level and technical people was an obstacle because their educational background did not reflect exposure to communication or the human dimension of development. They thought of communication as a “soft” discipline and therefore less important than their own “hard” technical discipline. And if resources were short, communication was seen as peripheral to the core substance and was often the first to be dropped.
- The organizational location and responsibility for Communication for Development was unclear in many organizations, with opinions varying from the extreme that everyone in an organization should be a communicator to the recognition that communication requires special knowledge and skills, and hence there should be communication specialists in every technical department of an organization.
- Politics were considered to be a serious problem in national contexts because every message or communication activity was always seen as

being politically motivated or self-serving. Development agency interviewees were far less conscious of national political tensions, though some did mention problems that could be caused by local power structures when trying to launch participatory development programmes.

- A shortage of financial resources for Communication for Development was identified as an obstacle by some, but not by all. Many said that well-planned communication activities would always find funding.
- Ignorance of, and lack of information about, Communication for Development was mentioned as an obstacle by a few respondents, often with the criticism that communication specialists had done a poor job in promoting their discipline in development circles.

The report of that 1994 survey provided valuable insights into why the generalized adoption of communication in development programmes was a slow process. That general adoption continues to be a slow process, and therefore in 2005, the Communication for Development Support Division of the World Bank decided that a similar survey would be worthwhile to establish what changes had taken place in the years since 1994, especially in respect of the understanding and appreciation of Communication for Development among decision- and policy-makers and of the resources being devoted to it. The report would be distributed and discussed at the World Congress on Communication for Development (WCCD) scheduled for 2006. While the 1994 survey was entirely qualitative in its strategy and reporting, this second survey included a short quantitative part designed to support the qualitative interviews with some structured data useful to validate and fine tune some of the information provided during the interviews.

The interviewees for this second survey were from a somewhat wider sector than in the first survey, for they included some highly placed academics and some people not working directly or full-time in development, but people nevertheless with a broad understanding of development issues. There were 27 interviews with multilateral organizations, of which 19 from the UN and its agencies and eight from the World Bank; 11 interviews with government officials, of which three in developed countries and eight from developing country governments; four from academia, for a total of 44.

Terminology: Definition of Communication for Development

With regard to the terminology used in this report, “Communication for Development” is taken to mean, as was stated in the questionnaire: *A social process for sharing ideas, knowledge, and skills in the context of a development initiative. Its function is to facilitate participation and consensus-building for decisions and for implementing development actions that take into account the*

interests, needs, and capacities of all concerned. Communication media may or may not be used in achieving the process, whereas interpersonal and group communication always plays a fundamental role.

When the term “strategic communication thinking” is used, as it was often by interviewees, it is meant as the analysis of a development situation in which there are likely, or existing, human obstacles. Strategic communication thinking would lead to a communication plan and activities aimed at smoothing out these problems through creating and facilitating a regular exchange of views between all concerned, the spreading of information tailored to the needs, and the like. It should be noted that Communication for Development in the sense understood in the survey and in this report is quite different to public information, public relations, external affairs, or “corporate communication” as it is often termed these days.

QUALITATIVE STUDY: THE OUTCOME OF THE INTERVIEWS

The responses of the interviewees were grouped under headings that broadly relate to the order of the questions in the questionnaire. The main emphasis was placed on reporting the opinions that were held by many of the interviewees, thus indicating overall tendencies, but relevant minority views will also be noted. *This abridged version of the report will focus on the responses to Question 8, as follows.*

Question 8: The main obstacles that have been making it generally difficult to adopt communication systematically into development projects

The underlying reasons for conducting this survey were the same as those in 1994, namely, to try to determine why mainstreaming communication into development programmes was progressing so slowly. This question was therefore the crucial one in both surveys. Most of the opinions expressed in this survey were similar to the answers to the same question in the 1994 survey, but their order of priority had changed.

Two main obstacles topped the list by a large margin: first, a lack of awareness and understanding of Communication for Development; and second, a lack of competent people working in this field. These two obstacles, and those that ranked much lower but were nevertheless important, are described below in the order that reflects the number of interviewees who made the same basic point.

1. Lack of awareness and understanding of Communication for Development,

lack of a clear definition of it, and a generally poor image of communication as an area of work

Interviewees ranked this obstacle about equal top with the one below whereas in the 1994 survey it was the last on the list. This would appear to indicate that Communication for Development has slipped backwards in the minds of today's policy- and decision-makers.

Some comments from interviewees were:

- "Communication for Development is still a concept that is not fully understood and it has not been clearly defined. It is not always evident that communication is a two way process. Many people still conceive it as a corporate/marketing tool to sell, convince, or persuade a target audience. This vagueness and lack of proper understanding is the reason why many are not convinced of its value-added."
- "Our Director General is very interested in communication. He has asked to make more efforts to improve the external image of the organization and to provide better messages to target audiences".
- "You should interview the president (of this organization) because he says that nobody knows it, even if it does a great job. He has been putting a lot of pressure on us to put pressure on policy-makers and to inform the general public too... He says we need better communication."
- "The policies in an institution are the result of pressure from interest groups. The communication people have little power because they are seen as coming from the PR world."
- "I attend a lot of very high level international meetings and the subject of Communication for Development never comes up."
- "The main constraint [in our country] has been the parliament, which often confuses the purpose of communication with propaganda. The politicians, who use communication for their own purposes rather than for participation, dialogue, and consensus building, don't understand."
- "Communication for Development is not known to management. There has been a lack of integration of it into our projects from the beginning and it has been left in the corner. Development agencies give communication in their projects low priority. We lack champions for it".

2. Lack of competent people working in Communication for Development

This obstacle received about the same number of mentions as the first, and it was also second on the list in 1994. The general sentiment expressed was that communication people with the capacity to think strategically about how to use communication within a development project or programme were in short supply.

Too many development agencies recruit pure journalists and media people for this work. In the minds of policy-makers, the profile of such people adds to the confusion between the specific area of Communication for Development and the more traditional and well-known area of communication for information and public relations.

- “Agencies are recruiting pure journalists who are not suitable for work in development programmes. The main interest of many agencies today is to obtain presence in the mass media...institutional communication only. We have lost the strategic thinking about communication in development programmes, and many communicators are still only reactive to demands for services arising from a particular situation, usually involving information and PR.”
- “For our projects we need communication people who listen to the technical people and make concrete proposals for what to do to solve a specific problem. There is a shortage of such people, and of people who can think strategically about communication in a given situation.”
- “We need practical people in communication, not theoretical, and not with the inclination to want to use communication for communication’s sake.”
- “Is a lack of good people for Communication for Development an obstacle? I don’t see any good people in that field. The best communicators have a technical background.”
- “A communication specialist [for development] needs to have field experience and command respect. Most communication people have a credibility and capability problem.”
- “There is a serious shortage of strategic thinkers in Communication for Development, people who can take a broad view and come up with proposals for action.”
- “Not all of our [ministry’s] communication people are aware that health promotion cannot be done without a strong educational component. This sometimes reaches the point of confusing the promotion of the institution’s image and doing public relations, which are doubtless important, but they are not as important as educational communication to help bring about behavioural change in the interests of better health.”

“We need to bring communication for development to the fore and rethink the profile of our communicators. We need people who can work in strategic communication. As an example of the thinking that anyone can do information and communication work, that it is not a specialized area, the actual director of communication in our HQ is a business administrator.”

- “The main obstacle is in the minds of Communication for Development people. They always seem to want to execute their own projects. No one in the communication unit in this organization has made any useful contact with the technical people in my department. And those technical people don’t think that the communication people have anything to offer.”
- “We have a programme development team and the people from the communication unit attend the meetings. They listen and learn, but seldom participate. They say afterwards that the meeting was very interesting and that they learned a lot, but they don’t make any contribution.”

Only one interviewee mentioned the quality of people to facilitate participatory discussions. Indeed, this is a particular communication skill and not something that comes naturally to everybody:

- “We need more quality in the communication people we use to run workshops in the field in which we let people express themselves.”

3. Inadequate financial resources

This was third on the list of obstacles, but was rated much less important than the first two:

- “The budget is always the greatest obstacle. Plus, many people just do not think it is important enough to give communication work the resources it needs.”
- “Administrators are risk-averse to allocating funds to Communication for Development programmes due to ignorance and spending money on something they do not know or understand, or whether positive results or a successful outcome can be guaranteed.”

4. Insufficient proof of the impact and cost-benefit of Communication for

Development

In the 1994 survey, this came out as the most important obstacle but in the present survey it was rated much lower:

- **“We are still lacking a methodologically sound and quantitative study on the impact of communication in operations. Empirical evidence is the key to convince those in the organization that are still sceptical about the value added by communication.”**
- **“You need to evaluate and have success stories.”**

5. The negative attitude of technical experts

This obstacle figured at about the same level of importance in the 1994 survey, with similar comments being made about the educational background of technical experts not being conducive to communication and the human aspects of development:

- **“There is an unwillingness among ‘experts’ to listen to the views of people at the grassroots level. It’s part of their culture.”**
- **“In the backs of people’s minds there is still a concept of technical assistance. ‘I, with my advanced education, am ready to help you, the poor and ignorant.’ The very notion of technical assistance means bringing in something from outside because it is better.”**
- **“Many projects failed because the so-called beneficiaries were never asked what they wanted or could do. Mentally, development people are still reluctant to ask those questions.”**

6. The organizational location and responsibility for Communication for Development

This obstacle rated at about the same level of importance as in 1994. There were some interviewees who were of the opinion that the Communication for Development function should be located in the technical departments of their organizations, and were critical of it being located, as it sometimes is, in the communication unit that also deals with public information and PR:

- “Organizations don’t have a natural place for Communication for Development. Communication is also a political tool. Should it be in the office of the president? Against that is that it might be used only for political purposes.”
- “We need communication people working in each technical department.”
- “We need the communication people to work in our projects, not in a separate unit. It is best to have interdisciplinary teams that include a communication person.”

7. Time pressure

This obstacle was not mentioned in 1994 but this time it was raised by some people in important development agencies. The feelings expressed were that the pressure to get quick results makes it difficult to take the time needed for communication and generating participation:

- “Institutions are judged by their results and by how well they have committed the available funds. So there is pressure to get on with implementation, and people ask, ‘Why do we need a communication specialist?’ This situation is contrary to what is needed for good project preparation and communication for it.”
- “A major problem is that donors today expect the quick-fix, want to see the results in a year or so, whereas the type of permanent social changes this organization wants to support take time. And communities may not be ready for the changes.”

8. Political constraints

This obstacle figured less highly in this survey than it did in 1994, but it was mentioned by a few interviewees. The basic view expressed was that politicians and administrators at all levels are basically uneasy about opening communication processes that can lead to the “messiness” of participation.

- “There is reluctance among governments in many developing countries to open up. A number of governments are still very nervous.”
- “The poor need a voice, but there is a fear that if you ask the poor about their needs they will ask for the impossible.”

One interviewee, while talking about his organization's progress in using a flexible approach in initial project design, in order to be able to respond better to people's changing needs as the project progressed, had the following exchange with the interviewer:

- **Interviewer: Do you have a problem with politics in your organization's work with the poor? Interviewee: I don't have a problem with politics: politics are the problem!**

9. Cultural considerations

Rather than an overall obstacle, cultural considerations were raised by a couple of interviewees in the sense of a practical difficulty in Communication for Development. The inability to work in local languages was mentioned, and several quotes have already been provided that highlight the problems of international specialists not understanding the local culture. However, many interviewees mentioned working with local communication people, or NGOs, as a way around the problem, perhaps with some guidance and training from international specialists.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This 2005-2006 survey demonstrates that there has been progress since its predecessor in 1994, as indicated by interviewees' agreement of the importance and usefulness of Communication for Development, the consensus that using communication in development projects is economically justified, and the willingness to include and/or expand the use of communication in the future. Importantly, the majority of interviewees were able to identify successful projects and programmes in which Communication for Development had made a key contribution.

An important finding resulting from the newly added quantitative element to the survey reveals that interpersonal/group communication is considered the most important and successful type of communication practice, particularly for fostering stakeholder participation. This finding needs to be brought to the core of the debate with communication practitioners and to the forefront of future communication strategies.

In addition, according to the findings of the survey, the lack of understanding of

the role and potential of communication scores second among the obstacles to using it more systematically in development projects. As previously noted, this confusion stems from the lack of a clear distinction between Communication for Development, as it is understood by the specialist community, and many policymakers who interpret “communication” as a single, all encompassing area of work. This confusion was less prevalent in 1994 when there was a much higher level of awareness and understanding of Communication for Development, even if many respondents did consider it an untidy and ill-defined area.

It seems therefore that Communication for Development has lost some of its identity in the minds of decision- and policy-makers, perhaps in part because of the now generalized and wider use of the word “communication”. However, another reason could be that knowledge of good experiences with Communication for Development does not spread enough, even in a single organization, because of compartmentalized structures. Also as in the past, Communication for Development specialists may not have communicated effectively about their work, a task made difficult by the lack of a clear and agreed definition of what the term covers.

Indeed, enhancing the role of Communication for Development requires a clear and agreed definition and a description of its scope and methods. For example, some interviewees mentioned the need to include advocacy within its scope. It clearly should when it concerns advocacy around a project or programme to bring on board the politicians, administrators, and other influential people whose support is needed.

The confusion between Communication for Development and public information/PR certainly needs to be addressed if Communication for Development is going to gain its rightful place in the development community. Should the confusion and lack of distinction persist, it will be more difficult to make improvements. Therefore it must be the responsibility of Communication for Development specialists to reshape and clarify the language and terminology of their field of work in order to make it more understandable and accessible, particularly to those who would benefit from integrating it into their development initiatives.

Communication for Development must be recognized as a separate science but not treated as inseparable or completely detached from the other fields of communication. This underscores the fundamental need for Communication for Development specialists to think beyond the box. Greater links with the other fields of communication should be taken into account during the policy-making and policy implementation process.

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The problematic issue of the competence of individuals working in Communication for Development, an obstacle that was cited as being of outstanding importance, also needs to be addressed. In order to overcome the stereotype that Communication for Development is equivalent to PR, more practitioners must possess knowledge that is quite different to that used in most public relations work. Practitioners in Communication for Development must possess knowledge and experience in the political, cultural, economic, technical and operational realities that can determine the outcome and success of projects or programmes at the community level.

Communication for Development specialists must have a better understanding of the subject matter in which they are working and must learn to cooperate closely with technicians in a multidisciplinary way.

The doubts expressed by officials in development agencies as to whether the participation of stakeholders is being truly achieved must be taken into account. These commonly expressed doubts may be attributable to a shortage of the specific communication skills needed to set up and facilitate truly participatory discussions. Often, timid beneficiaries may not express their true opinions due to cultural and social customs. This can block the intended goal of achieving participation.

Although interviewees were not asked to define how they understood “participation”, it is important to acknowledge the differing interpretations of the term. For the most part, the responses from those most directly involved in development work appeared to indicate that they were thinking in terms of consultation, involvement and partnership.

Expanding formal training in Communication for Development takes on even greater importance in the light of this survey. The question of training has been discussed for many years, and relatively recently, there have been discussions about launching postgraduate courses in the subject. Any formal training should include a period of practical work in the field. Development organizations should look for individuals who have such formal training, or for persons with solid field experience.

The issue of the role and responsibility of Communication for Development and where it belongs within the organizational structure of multilaterals and bilateral organizations remains a recurrent problem. Some respondents expressed a sense

of overwhelming difficulties whenever the Communication for Development specialists were placed within a communication unit focusing primarily on public relations and corporate communication. Perhaps the Communication for Development function would be more suitably located in the technical departments of organizations, with interdisciplinary functions.

Although progress has been achieved since the first survey in 1994, much work remains to be done. In order for Communication for Development to become mainstreamed in the development arena, several steps need to be taken. The Communication for Development community must take a more pragmatic approach when becoming involved in development projects and programmes which facilitates greater understanding for those involved in the formulation and implementation stages. Some practical ways to achieve this include improved knowledge and effective application of the following areas: a) drawing up communication networks tailored to the environment in question; b) developing a rigorous stakeholder analysis that includes political, social and economic realities; c) grasping the scientific methodologies that express and reflect public sentiment in the forms of surveys, public opinion polls etc. and; d) mastering monitoring and evaluation techniques.

For more information or to obtain a copy of the full version of the report contact Lucia Grenna at lgrenna@worldbank.org



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