COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT: MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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How far has humankind come in the last 50, 20 or even 10 years in achieving the goal of freeing people from what Mandela called “the prison of poverty”? In the year 2006, it is estimated that 1.3 billion people worldwide still live in absolute poverty. Most are in developing countries, but poverty also reaches into industrialized regions, such as North America and Europe. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the Member States of the United Nations strive to address critical poverty issues and solve some of the most pressing problems within the next decade. But will they be successful? Are citizens in donor countries fatigued by endless calls to arms? Is there really light at the end of the long, dark tunnel of inequality? Why have we not yet resolved the key problems? And have any poverty alleviation solutions of the past really worked?

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, humanity holds within its grasp some of the most powerful technologies ever invented. In particular, modern communication tools have enabled us to make the world a smaller place, as well as providing us with gateways to knowledge and pathways to information. However, these very structures, without which the global economy would not function and humankind would not be able to instantly communicate across continents, have been relatively marginalized as partners in the development process. Now is the time to recognise the potential and power of these instruments and to utilize them in unshackling people from their “prison of poverty”.

But communication for development and social change is more than satellite television, community radio, mobile phones, ICTs, and the Internet. Certainly, it can call on all these resources. However, at its heart it is about individuals and about employing the most appropriate methods and tools to empower those individuals to set their own agendas and achieve their own defined goals. Often, development projects and
programmes have stalled, reversed or even failed for want of simple communication discourse with the recipients. It should be mandatory that the clientele of any donor-funded development project be fully involved in the design, planning and outcome-setting process from the outset of that project’s genesis. To do otherwise, flies in the face of reason. The logic seems obvious. However, every day, donors defy logic by planning grand visions without once consulting with those who will live with the decisions.

For more than 60 years, communication for development professionals have been working with grassroots communities to break this cycle of habit and further enable end-users to interact with donors, not just as partners in development, but leaders in their own advancement. Countless examples exist of measurable outcomes where the ‘value-added’ of communication has aided the successful implementation of worthwhile and life-changing programmes and where locally designed best practices are working to “make poverty history”.

Communication that underpins and leads to successful and sustainable development action puts the people who are most affected at the centre of the discussions, debates, choices and decisions needed to guide their own development. It is a socio-cultural process of dialogue, information-sharing, building mutual understanding, agreeing to collective action and amplifying the voice of people to influence policies that affect their lives. It makes use of a variety of communication vehicles from mass to community media and new technologies to traditional and folk media and inter-personal communication. Its central goal is to empower people to take action to positively effect their own development according to their own cultural and social needs and requirements.

Communication for development utilizes the society’s entire communication system including interpersonal, social, community, organizational networks as well as conventional and electronic media in a communication environment that underpins knowledge and media accessibility, content diversity and good governance.

To work most effectively, it requires an enabling environment that includes:

- A free, independent, pluralistic and responsible media system through which open dialogue and debate can occur.
- Open, transparent and accountable government that encourages public debate, discussion and input.
• Broad public access to a variety of communication media and channels, as well as a regulatory environment that promotes pro-poor licensing for local radio and low cost universal access to Internet and telephone services.

• An open society in which all groups and sectors are able to participate fully in development discussions, debates and decision making processes.

FROM THEORY TO PRAXIS

Academics can assist citizens and public authorities in structuring the debate and identifying the real issues. However, government officials, practitioners and others working in the development field may have different perceptions of what the defining characteristics of development communication are.

Since the Second World War, the focus of communication for development is no longer predominantly or exclusively focused on information dissemination and the diffusion of innovations. Its scope has broadened to include the interpersonal dimension, i.e. dialogue, which is needed to achieve mutual understanding, build trust and seek consensus, thus facilitating the achievement of sustainable changes. This means that communication should not be included only halfway through the project, but it should be a key ingredient from the beginning of any development initiative.

A variety of theoretical models can be used to devise communication strategies for development. As each case and context is different, none has proven to be completely satisfactory. In other words, each society and community must attempt to delineate its own strategy to sustainable development. This implies that the development problem is a relative problem and that no one society can contend that it is 'developed' in every respect. Therefore, we believe that the scope and degree of interdependency must be addressed in relationship with the content of the concept of development.

Many practitioners find that they can achieve the greatest understanding by combining more than one theory or developing their own conceptual framework.

Where previous perspectives did not succeed in reconciling economic growth with social justice, an attempt should be made to approach problems of freedom and justice from the relationship of tension between
the individual and the society, and limits of growth and sustainability are seen as inherent to the interaction between society and its physical and cultural ecology.

CURRENT COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Communication for development in governance

**Approach**

The critical importance of a free and balanced flow of information to an engaged and active civil society, through an independent media and transparent government, has long been acknowledged. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, and regardless of frontiers.”

Implied in Article 19 is the connotation that the media are potential champions of the poor, oppressed, and politically suppressed. However, in the 60 years since the Declaration of Human Rights was promulgated, reality has often been sadly at variance with these intentions. Now, in a 21st century society where the means of communication have developed exponentially, possibilities for community empowerment and access to information have also expanded. The furtherance of media and communication processes in support of increased information flows, accountability of governmental authorities, transparency, anti-corruption measures, and increased democratic reform are all now firmly on the governance agenda.

Communication plays a pivotal role in improving governance in developing countries. Governance may be defined as (1) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, (2) the capacity of the government to formulate and implement sound policies effectively, (3) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them, and (4) the capacity for active and informed political dialogue among citizens within a public sphere.

Communication also enhances public participation. Participation and monitoring mechanisms may be situated in national efforts to improve public sector performance, increase transparency and reduce corruption.
A system of checks and balances, in which communication is one of the key elements, is designed to achieve accountability among and within various agencies of government, manage conflicts of interest in the public sector, effectively disperse power through increasing public participation, and limit situations conducive to corrupt behaviour. The effective management within the public sector relies upon these systems of accountability (World Bank, 2006).

Governance also incorporates attention to the public sphere, in which informed citizens actively engage in dialogue on political matters. Communication enhances the potential for civil society to hold governmental authorities accountable as well as to engage in political decision making. Empowering citizens to demand accountability and participation in decision making is critical to good governance.

**Public Institutions Governance**

Active participation of citizens and civil society groups in policy-making is now widely considered a sound investment and a core element of good governance, as it allows governments to tap wider sources of information and improves the quality and participation of the decisions reached by institutions at all levels. Citizens’ participation and civic engagement takes several forms, but each of them has at its core interactive communication models.

According to a number of international organisations including the OECD and the World Bank, in strengthening their relations with citizens and their participation to policymaking, governments should ensure that information flows and communication channels are complete, objective, reliable, and accessible. More importantly, consultation, participation, and dialogue with citizens should foster active political participation.

Effective communication in public sector institutions is a primary function of institutional performance as well as its leadership. It is through clear and consistent communication of the practices, values, and objectives of the various public sector bodies to staff, management and external stakeholders that the public sector most effectively supports good governance outcomes and contributes to stakeholder confidence in the public sector. In particular, openness, integrity and effective communication are vital pre-requisites of good governance. These qualities contribute to, and are implicitly linked with, other principles such as disclosure, commitment and integration, to ensure accountability in the use of public assets in the quest to achieve stated goals and objectives and required performance levels.
Communication can significantly improve public sector performance and policy formulation when members of institutions convey information and engage in dialogue with citizen groups.

**Access to public sector information**

Governance entails public debate and open participatory decision-making; hence, the organization of interest groups and the free exchange of ideas, opinions and information are essential to good governance. Addressing the information and communication needs of the poor and other oppressed groups is also essential, particularly when basic information concerning human rights and entitlements, public services, health, education, employment etc., is lacking. These groups also lack visibility and defining policy priorities and accessing resources.

The public sector is the single biggest producer of information in the developing world. Examples are demographic data, economic statistics, geographic information, business information, and local level government information. This information resource has a considerable social and economic potential which is untapped most of the time. Public sector information is an important economic asset: it constitutes raw material for new services, improvement of already existing services, and facilitation of commerce and trading. The presence of readily available information products based on public sector information could greatly facilitate the functioning of society as a whole. A number of barriers, however, hamper the realization of the full economic and social potential of public sector information in developing countries.

**Local Government and Communities**

There is a growing consensus among development agencies, NGOs, and development practitioners that good local governance creates the conditions for sustainable development and poverty reduction by increasing citizens’ participation in the local development process. Local authorities and civic groups can be influential in delivering quality services to local citizens. If they are to fulfill these roles effectively, good communication is essential to manage and answer the most pressing questions of local development: Do these local government reforms offer new spaces and significantly increase popular participation in governance? What are groups working on participation doing in relationship to governance? What participatory methods can be used? A growing body of literature demonstrates ways citizen input can be linked to policy making processes and can improve perceptions of local government legitimacy (Renn, Webler, and Wiedemann, 1995).
Local governments and citizen participation play a major role in this effort by ensuring more effective and accountable local infrastructure and service delivery for the poor and by improving dialogue among different entities, including the state, local communities and the private sector. For the last twenty years, the concept of participation has been widely used in local development, referring primarily to community activities; it has now been enhanced to incorporate citizenship rights and local democratic governance. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the multitude of new programmes for decentralized governance that are found in both southern and northern countries.

Part of the international donors’ and NGOs’ local development strategies involve building partnerships and communication channels with and between national institutions, local authorities, community organizations, civil society, private sector, and citizens. These strategies also involve promoting policy and institutional reforms to enable the transfer of powers and financial resources to more effective and accountable local spheres of government. Popular education and communication activities methodologies are needed to strengthen citizens’ awareness and responsibilities under new local governance legislation.

Monitoring and evaluation of the communication activities should be undertaken at multiple levels and particularly in local communities. Fortunately, local authorities have increased their monitoring and evaluation activities in recent years, although most of such work is still conducted in-house.

**Anticorruption, Accountability and Transparency**

Civil society organizations and citizens play a key role in fighting corruption. In so doing, they constitute an effective self-governance tool. The OECD, World Bank, EU, Transparency International, and other bodies widely recognize the role that an informed civil society plays in fighting corruption and advocating for more accountability and transparency in government. But what does this mean from a communication standpoint?

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the general public have taken advantage of multiple communication channels, both to support the monitoring processes and to denounce corrupt government practices. They have done so through various practices, including the encouragement of ombudsmen and whistleblowers.

The EU placed communication as one of the linchpins of anticorruption efforts in countries seeking accession to EU. “Communication on a
Comprehensive EU Policy Against Corruption” ensures that independent media and the free flow of information are among the most important anti-corruption efforts a country can make. Communication also helps the process of demystifying and depersonalizing government--opening up information, informing citizens of their legal rights in dealing with government and publishing staff manuals which are easily accessible to department users, contractors, and think tanks. An increasing number of studies suggest that media prevalence can be linked to improved delivery of government services because media coverage creates pressure for accountability (Adsera, Boix, and Payne, 2000; Besley and Burgess, 2003).

**Economic Reforms and Infrastructure for Service Delivery**

Economic reforms and infrastructures constitute a significant part of the donors’ lending and technical assistance programs to developing countries. Such reforms go to the core of the norms around which societies are organized, thus affecting the relationship and informal interactions between institutions and citizens and therefore require all parties to accept a significant change in beliefs and perceptions about the nature of public goods and a new balance between government responsibility, public investment, and private-sector activities.

In this highly complex socio-political environment, economic reforms and infrastructure projects are under increased public scrutiny. Performance of communication activities based on product outputs (e.g., number of radio and TV spots, advertisements, etc.) is no longer sufficient to meet these new demands. Constituencies want to know more about how reforms can have a significant impact on poverty reduction and the economic participation wellbeing of all citizens. Traditionally, many infrastructure projects have often been accompanied by controversy. In this respect, a communication role has often been that of damage-control. Within the current development context, however, communication is expected to anticipate and prevent problems, not just chronicle their efforts.

**Role of the Media in Good Governance**

The role of the media is critical in promoting good governance through institutional monitoring. The media are critical elements on a country’s institutional accountability and anticorruption efforts. They have a dual role to play: they not only raise public awareness about corruption, its causes, consequences and possible remedies, they also investigate and reports incidences of corruption. The effectiveness of the media, in turn, depends on access to information and freedom of expression, as well as a
When the media are working well, they prevent corruption via their monitoring activities. Investigative journalism may reveal inequities and violations and, by doing so, reinforce social values. In a very practical sense, they may also reduce incidences of corruption in both the public and private sector. By the same token, in an environment of free speech and a free press, the media perform a watchdog function and expose social injustices wherever they occur. In an open, pluralistic, and developed society, the media are a particularly effective tool for exposing and preventing corruption; they are successful at this, because corruption cases usually make the news.

In recent years, the word ‘governance’ has been integrated into the language of development and social change. The term has a wide range of connotations and understandings, often depending upon the stance of the organization, body or authority involved.

The role of media in good governance initiatives is a relatively new area of concentration for international agencies and donors. The difficulties facing international agencies, donors and NGOs in assisting the strengthening of communication processes to better combat poor governance issues, are manifold. The World Bank itself has admitted that it “does not have the authority to demand press freedoms in its borrowing countries” (Severino, p.2. in AFR, 5/4/99).

UNESCO is another international organization with an on-going programme supportive of press freedom and governance. Its 2005 World Press Freedom Day theme was devoted to the subject. The Final Declaration of the global conference stressed that “independent and pluralistic media are essential for ensuring transparency, accountability and participation as fundamental elements of good governance and human-rights based development.” It also called on UNESCO's Member States to “respect the function of the news media as an essential factor in good governance, vital to increasing both transparency and accountability in decision-making processes and to communicating the principles of good governance to society.”

The dilemma facing the international community in this domain is in translating words into actions through a positive interface with national governments and in-country authorities, and in combating attempts to derail the process and deny the citizenry access to the information needed to improve lives.
Evidence and Value Added by Governance and Development

Relative to other development themes, such as health, communication in support of good governance represents a relatively new field and one with a unique set of challenges. Further study will be required to provide evidence of successful practices in different development sectors. The following cases illustrate the promise and potential of development communication in the governance arena.

Voices on the Breeze - Communication for Empowerment in Zambia

Until 2003, when Breeze FM came on air, the people of Chipata in eastern Zambia, had little involvement in the content of their local radio broadcasting. Information came from two main sources: government radio stations, which broadcast from the capital city, Lusaka, located some 600 kilometres away; and civil society and religious sources. The communication was largely one-way and was about issues that the government, civil society and church organizations thought were important for the people. Two things were missing: relevant and localized information on the issues that most affected and most concerned people in the region; and the opportunity to discuss and bring to public attention their concerns and perceptions.

When Breeze FM opened in the provincial town of Chipata in 2003, the situation changed. The commercial station prided itself on serving the community. It hired a retired school teacher who soon became known as “Gogo” (grandfather) Breeze. Gogo Breeze is pioneering a new type of journalism. Every day he travels on his bicycle from township to township and village to village, meeting and talking to people about their lives and problems. In addition to recording their long-ignored folklore and music, Gogo Breeze follows up on people’s complaints and grievances. He covers distances of up to 70 kilometres responding to the requests from villagers to visit their areas. When at the station he spends a lot of time receiving ordinary folk who come into town.

Other programmes include the most popular ‘Letters from Our Listeners’ in which people, young and old, ask for his assistance in resolving issues ranging from family and community conflicts to poor governance and service delivery at central, provincial, local and traditional levels. The government is slowly waking up to the fact that the local radio station is more effective in communicating important information to the public than its own national station and, as a result, it is beginning to work with the Breeze station on agricultural, education, environment and health issues.

Not just radio: India and the rural newspaper revolution
India has undergone more dramatic and rapid change in its media landscape perhaps than any other country, characterized particularly by a dramatic liberalization and an explosion of satellite television. A less documented, but no less significant, revolution is taking place in its rural newspaper industry.

In many countries, people living in rural areas are considered to be a low priority for newspapers. Distribution is expensive, newsgathering difficult and advertisers are often uninterested in a population with so little purchasing power. In India, however, rural areas are increasingly important business for newspapers. In many Indian states, including Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh or Uttar Pradesh, newspapers have fine-tuned their publication and delivery schedules to deliver newspapers by six a.m. to villages (or at least those that are close to roads), in every district of the state. A market for newspapers has been created by growing literacy rates, improved roads and other communications, increased purchasing power and by increased hunger for information of all kinds. Newspapers which have found their urban markets declining or stagnating, and advertising income leaching to television, have been forced to look for new markets.

Local newspaper editions are now important information channels for development agents at the village level. Civil society organizations have been able to get community news, including women’s news, as well as to publicly raise these issues in the wider society. This development has been reported to add transparency to the dynamics of political parties, generating discussion on given policy options. On the other hand, Sevanta Ninan, an Indian media researcher who has written extensively on this revolution, argues that the revolution has its drawbacks. “Rural scribes are loose cannons. They inform, but they also sensationalise and trivialise.” The newspaper revolution has also tended to be driven by profit-maximizing, rather than development concerns. The Indian government is resisting pressure to liberalize radio broadcasting and this in turn has prevented the emergence of a vibrant community radio sector. Rural newspapers are in some respects filling this gap, providing an obvious point of engagement for those working to improve governance.

*Communication for Empowerment in Peru: Citizens’ Media Watch*

Citizens’ Media Watch brings together eleven civil society organizations to monitor the quality of the mass media in Peru. Founded in 2001 and hosted by the NGO Calandria, it consists of the National Association of Advertisers (ANDA), UNICEF, communication faculties of several different universities and a web of interested specialists and opinion
leaders. There is also a group of volunteers from seven cities: Lima, Arequipa, Cusco, Puno, Iquitos, Trujillo, and Chimbote. The principal objectives of Citizens’ Media Watch are to: mobilize civil society institutions to work towards better quality mass media content; make visible citizens’ opinions regarding the media; educate and mobilize citizens to achieve the right to voice their opinions; and influence the authorities, entrepreneurs, and media themselves to see their responsibility in communicating with Peruvian audiences. Citizens’ Media Watch claims that it is currently the only institution in Peru dedicated exclusively to monitoring media for better quality and to offering mechanisms for citizen participation. Through Media Watch, citizens can express their opinion about media.

*Ter Yat: The Ugandan Mega Forum*

Ter Yat is a weekly political talk show broadcast on Mega FM, a community based radio station in Gulu, northern Uganda. It was established explicitly to increase dialogue and public understanding in order to defuse tensions. Supported by DFID, but run on a commercial basis, the station broadcasts 24 hours a day, and has a strong emphasis on development programming. Unlike most other radio stations accessible in the region, it broadcasts in Luo, the local language. Audience research suggests that it is listened to by more than half a million people. Ter Yat is one of the most popular programmes on the station. It is broadcast on Saturday mornings. Political leaders and opinion makers discuss issues of regional and national importance. Ministers, members of parliament, religious leaders, politicians and rebels talk in the studio or by phone and give their views on the way forward to peace and development.

*The Potential for Development Communication in the Field of Governance*

Communication provides the foundation necessary for the facilitation of good governance, through promotion of effective government, accountability and the active engagement of participants in civil society. The above examples illustrate how local radio and newspaper systems can engage citizens in relevant political dialogue and decision making.

It is important to note that good governance and good government are not the same. Good governance is based on the participation of all people concerned. Focusing on the operation of governmental institutions, such as decentralization, does not go far enough. Decentralization does not always signify democratization. In reality the motives for decentralization may hide a central authorities’ desire to dispense with certain obligations while tightening their control in other areas.
In order to promote participation, it is important to reinforce independent and pluralistic media. For media to be able to offer a critical view of government, political and economic systems must enable the media to operate in as open a public sphere as possible. Press freedom is never guaranteed, particularly when media industries are commercialized, even in a democracy. Apart from creating the appropriate political and economic environments for a free press system, it is crucial to educate journalists to the highest ethical and professional standards possible.

These issues are relevant to all media systems, but especially print and broadcasting. They also address ICTs potential to promote governmental transparency and to engage civil society in yet to be defined ways. Discussions of relevant media systems must take into account the expectations and aspirations of the communities involved. For the media to provide a useful public sphere for political dialogue, the technological systems, content, and language need to be accessible by local communities. In addition, although most of this discourse tends to focus on the importance of news and information systems, the critical role of popular culture in political socialization should not be overlooked.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

**Current situation**

Communication for development has become multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and participatory, and should be seen in its socio-political, economic and cultural contexts to be relevant for people.

In essence, communication for development is about the development of people. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) should be addressed and assessed from a people’s perspective. It is therefore essential to start from the perspective of local communities and to cooperate with organizations (UN, governmental, NGOs, the public and the private sector, and civil society) that have developed a trust within a community.

In practice and in view of both globalising and localising pressures communication for development is becoming even more necessary within the context of the 21st century, bearing in mind the new political, economic and communications landscapes.

This includes listing and defining its various domains, such as project-
related and community communication, development journalism, development communication in the mainstream media, educational communication, health communication, environmental communication, social marketing, social mobilization, advocacy etc.

However, communication for development should not be technology driven. It should be based on social issues and concerns. Technology is at best a facilitator and a tool. Instead, culture is central to development and deserves greater emphasis in communication for development programmes.

Main challenges for the field of communication for development

Main challenges for communication for development to be recognized as a field in its own right and to be adopted systematically in development initiatives:

1. Good governance, transparency, accountability and development communication go hand in hand. Good governance and a good government are not the same. Good governance is based on the participation of all people concerned. Decentralization of governmental institutions does not necessarily imply people’s participation. Decentralization does not always mean democratization. In reality the motives for decentralizing may hide a wish of central powers to get rid of certain responsibilities while tightening their control. This blurs the lines of accountability. For this reason, local media have a crucial role to play in facilitating a mutual understanding between those in power and the communities.

2. Participatory concepts in the context of communication for development can be complex and challenging. Communities consist of fluid interests and shifting relationships.

3. Participation can take place at different levels: (a) decision making; (b) benefits; (c) evaluation; and (d) implementation. Participation is about changing power relations. While empowering one group, it may do the opposite to another. Meaningful participation requires organization around common interests and awareness on how to handle power relations.

4. It is important to reinforce independent and pluralistic media to foster good governance and transparency. Print media can play a special role in society as they are sometimes more independent and pluralistic than radio and television. However, all media need to be sensitized and become more participatory. Currently there is often a gap between what media report
and the realities of a country. Pure commercialism avoids tackling the crucial issues of a country because such issues do not sell. It undermines the role of media as watchdogs. Press freedom is never guaranteed, not even in a democracy.

5. Communication for development has not made full use of the potential of radio, which in some regions could be the most effective participatory tool. Radio has the highest penetration in many rural areas in developing countries. It is not too late to rediscover radio. In particular community radio (often linked to the global world through the Internet) has proven its ability to make participation effective and sustainable. Therefore, also ICTs are an important tool to facilitate good governance provided that application and operation systems are made available in local languages.

6. Communication for development initiatives need to be properly enabled by concerted actions, and adequate policies and resources. These should consider longer timescales. It is essential to bridge the digital divide by supporting community access to relevant information in their own language and at an affordable cost. This should also involve support for the production of content by the local communities.

7. National governments should implement a legal and supportive framework favouring the right to free expression and the emergence of free and pluralistic information systems, including the recognition of the specific and crucial role of community media in providing access to communication for isolated and marginalized groups. There is a need to influence policy on communication for development through advocacy, with governments and international agencies but also within development agencies, private corporations and civil society partners, for communication for development to be successful.

8. Building alliances. There is a need for effective linkages which give voices to the poorest and have the ability to engage with policy and influence decision making on sustainable development. To this end, special attention should be given to fostering local, national and regional communication for development processes.

9. New global partnerships are necessary with the media, development agencies, universities and governments. It is important to identify possibilities for convergence and for complementing existing work and to coordinate and document such work via a truly independent scientific body.

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