



## POLICY-MAKERS PERCEPTIONS' OF COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT: TWO SURVEYS TWELVE YEARS APART

Personal reflections on what changed between 1994 and 2006 and its implications for advocacy

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Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo Estrada were closely involved in two surveys of policy-makers' perceptions of communication for development undertaken in 1994 and 2006. They drew up the methodology for the qualitative survey of 1994, personally conducted 30 of the 40 interviews, and wrote the report. For the 2006 survey, they drafted the methodology, worked with the World Bank in refining it, conducted 15 of the 43 interviews, and wrote the sections of the report that cover the qualitative aspects. In this article they share the insights they gained along these processes, especially with regard to advocacy for Communication for Development.

Communication for Development professionals still have a long road to travel to gain general acceptance and practical adoption in development programmes and projects: this was shown by both surveys. In fact, despite much truly excellent work that is going on at the local level in many countries –mainly by dedicated NGOs, Communication for Development appears to have lost some ground since 1994 at the policy/institutional level in major development agencies. In that year's survey, virtually all of the interviewees knew about the meaning and role of Communication for Development (as part of development programmes and projects), even if many among them considered it a fuzzy and ill-defined area. Yet, in 2006 there was widespread confusion between Communication for Development, on the one hand, and corporate communication, public information and PR on the other.

### THE NAME AND THE NAMING

Clearly, today's use of the word "communication(s)" to cover everything, including what a decade or so ago was called public information, PR and

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the like, has blurred the image of Communication for Development. But we specialists in the field are also to blame for the lessened profile. Why did the 1994 accusations that Communication for Development was fuzzy and vague still persist in 2006, with many interviewees still calling for a definition and description of its functions and methods? We communication for development professionals seem to be ineffectual in communicating about our work, a situation that has hardly changed since 1994.

However, and to be fair, we face an inherent problem in that Communication for Development can cover a very wide range of approaches and activities in a huge number of variable situations, and it is perhaps for this reason that no agreed definition has been reached. Nevertheless, many definitions have been written over the years, and some of them are clear and to the point, but there has never been an agreement to standardize on one of them in the interests of advocating for the discipline with policy-makers. In addition to the absence of an agreed definition, we communication for development professionals further complicate matters by haphazardly inventing new names for our discipline. Over the years since its inception in the late 60s, we have had all of the following (and perhaps others that escape us): 'Project Support Communication,' 'Development Support Communication,' 'Programme Communication,' 'Communication for Development,' 'Development Communication,' 'Information, Education and Communication,' 'Devcom,' 'Devcomm,' 'ComDev,' and 'C4D.'

Still on the issue of terminology, a particular personal complaint of ours: even if it is apparently a small matter, is that some people put a final letter 's' on 'communication', as if we were dealing with faxes and emails, rather than a social process, which must by its very nature require description with the word 'communication' in the singular.

Even the term that many people thought was more-or-less standard, 'Communication for Development,' has problems. One 2006 interviewee, a man with long experience in development and who knew very well what we were talking about, said, "Are you talking about Communication *in* development or *in favour of* development?" It was a deliberately provocative question, but a very astute one that illustrates how the term can lead to confusion; it was found unclear in 1994, and it still was in 2006. Readers might wonder what's in a name, but we beg to differ: if we can't even agree on a common denomination we all use, how can we expect policy-makers to understand and accept our discipline as a vital ingredient in development programmes?

In addition to our lack of an agreed definition and our use of different names, we communication for development professionals have too great a

tendency to use jargon in our writing and speaking, which may be all right for other communicators, but is way off-beam for anyone outside of our own discipline. Of all people, we should know how to tailor our message to our audience, but we are often abstract and waffly instead of being precise and concise when addressing development professionals from technical sectors.

The confusion between Communication for Development and public information/PR needs to be cleared up. Re-creating the image of Communication for Development would be one way of making it easily distinguishable from other areas of communication work. In effect, Communication for Development falls to a large extent into the area of social and behavioural science, which has been defined as: “The decision processes and communication strategies within and between organisms in a social system” <sup>[1]</sup>. Perhaps a new title or slogan could be invented that would reflect this link to social and behavioural sciences. If such a title or slogan were invented as a re-branding, perhaps through the Communication for Development Roundtable <sup>[2]</sup>, there should be an appeal to all practitioners to use it. The Communication Initiative <sup>[3]</sup> could spread the message.

A re-branding would in fact follow a long tradition in development work. For example, Rural Development, Integrated Rural Development, Area Development, Basic Needs, Livelihoods, etc., have all had their fashionable periods, but fundamentally not much that lies behind the terms has changed. Should we in the Communication for Development field seriously consider a re-branding, as was suggested by one very senior and experienced interviewee in 2006?

## ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

A further indication of institutional ground lost since 1994 is that two of the UN agencies that had active programmes in Communication for Development from the late 1960s onwards and did pioneering and highly respected work in the field, have practically dropped those programmes. It is true that since 1994, one very major agency has taken up Communication for Development and in addition, a major foundation became involved. But welcome as these new entrants are, they hardly compensate for the grave loss of momentum in two agencies that played such a key and successful role in the past.

Furthermore, and as so often happens when new entrants come into a field of activity, past experiences, both good and bad, are often totally ignored. The desire of human beings to make their own mark too often

results in reinventing the wheel, repeating errors of the past, and disregarding successful experiences from which to build on. It seems that Communication for Development could be blighted by this phenomenon. The effect is that less progress is made in achieving successful results in the field, therefore losing traction that would be necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of Communication for Development.

## TO WHOM SHOULD WE BE ADVOCATING?

In respect of advocacy for Communication for Development, there is a generalized opinion, and one that was reinforced by the line taken by the Rome WCCD, that Communication for Development professionals should be aiming at policy-makers. We, the authors, wonder whether this is wholly correct. Policy-makers in development organizations are often so senior that they no longer have much contact with day-to-day realities of the field work of their organizations. It is generally the people who design projects at the senior technical level who set operational strategies in the field, in our case by including or not including communication in projects. They usually have a great deal of autonomy in how they draw up projects, while the so-called policy-makers mainly sign off on their work. It therefore seems to us that even if policy-makers remain an important target, we should do much more to work with technicians in a multidisciplinary way and prove our practical worth in helping their projects reach their objectives.

Advocating in favour of Communication for Development needs to come down from general declarations of principle, be more prescriptive, and explain how it actually works in the field. Moreover, we need to propose practical solutions, because those at the sharp end of project design and implementation are under pressure to deliver their programmes effectively and on time. If we Communication for Development professionals can help the technicians do that, working as a team with them and proving that our “soft” science has real practical value, the results will speak for themselves. Technicians are usually in a good position to inform their peers, and thus the knowledge about successful Communication for Development could snowball at the operational level.

The implication for professional people working in Communication for Development is that they must go to pains to learn about the subject matter in which they are asked to work. By doing this, they can talk some of the same language as their technical counterparts and gain their respect, while also ensuring that the communication activities they mount have a technically correct focus.

## PREPARING PROFESSIONALS IN COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

The complaints of a very high number of interviewees in both 1994 and 2006 about a lack of people competent to work in Communication for Development – particularly people with a capacity for strategic thinking and practical communication planning – should give us all cause for serious concern. The need for training in Communication for Development has been under discussion in our fraternity for almost three decades, and there has indeed been progress in recent years in establishing formal academic training in a number of universities around the world. One can suppose that ultimately this training will fill the gap.

It is perhaps interesting to reflect for a moment about the people who have worked most successfully in Communication for Development. They have come from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, including of course some from communication studies, but others came from technical backgrounds, from psychology, and from the social sciences. But they have all had some characteristics in common, among them a strong sense of commitment to help the underprivileged, an ability to identify with them and see things from their perspective, and respect and humility when working with them. They have also had outstanding listening skills, enjoyed being with urban and rural poor, and been prepared to work in field conditions that were often far from comfortable. Formal training will not necessarily guaranty these attributes, which are essentially inherent qualities in a person, but it is to be hoped that the training now being provided by some institutions is firmly drawing attention to their importance.

A major point that emerged in both surveys was that the discipline of Communication for Development is being plagued by the fact that too many development organizations routinely recruit pure journalists and media specialists for this work. This has two grave consequences: first, they are not competent enough in a development context in the field to deliver the strategies required; and second, in the minds of policy-makers and technicians, Communication for Development practitioners people come from the institutional communication and PR area, which in most development organizations are of low prestige. In both cases, the reputation of Communication for Development is damaged.

Of course, journalism or media can constitute a suitable background for working in Communication for Development, but in addition, a real understanding of development issues at the field level – especially in their human and change aspects – is essential. This is unlikely to be the case when, as happened in an example we know personally, an agency

recruited as its senior advisor in Communication for Development, for all of the countries of a region, a person whose main experience was working for the "Voice of America", the US Government's international and multilingual news service by radio. Sadly, this is just one example of many we could cite.

Most probably, these recruitments are made because those responsible for the choice do not realize that Communication for Development is a specialization, that there are people with valuable experience in it, and that ever more are now emerging with university qualifications in it. This information needs to be got across to those making recruitment decisions. And they need to be made to understand the fallacy of the notion that "communication" is an all-embracing area and that, for example, a producer of excellent commercial videos in an industrialized country is fitted to work in Communication for Development in a field situation. It is up to Communication for Development specialists to try to restrain unsuitable recruitments by spreading this message to the personnel departments and staff selection committees in their organizations. Perhaps they could also build up rosters of Communication for Development specialists with a good track record, especially those in developing countries, as suggested by one interviewee in 2006.

The 2006 survey results showed that interpersonal/group communication was considered by far the most important way of achieving participation of stakeholders in development actions. But curiously, only one interviewee mentioned the need for higher quality in the people who run participatory discussions in the field. It is all too common to see technicians holding a meeting with poor rural people that is termed "participatory", when in fact it is far from it. The technical specialists, seated on chairs behind a table, will be firing questions at the local people, who are sitting on the ground in front of them. The technical specialists seem not to notice that this physical layout alone creates an authoritarian relationship, and that the answers provided come only from those who have the courage to speak up... most of them probably saying what they think those "important" people want to hear, while the rest remain silent.

One wonders, therefore, if the frequent doubts expressed by interviewees in both 1994 and 2006 as to whether their organizations were truly achieving participation, if well-founded, might be due to a lack of the very special communication skills needed to set up and facilitate truly participatory discussions - in which only the most timid and tongue-tied cannot be reached by good facilitator's subtle encouragements to speak their mind.

At the end of some of the interviews that we conducted in the Europe-based development agencies in 2006, and when the interviewee had been

particularly forthcoming, we asked what Communication for Development people should do to improve the recognition of their work and to gain its more general adoption. This was not part of the formal questionnaire, but some of the opinions expressed are worth recording here. They could be useful for consideration in any advocacy strategy for Communication for Development.

Several interviewees mentioned the need to provide proof of the effectiveness of Communication for Development – as almost all did in 1994. They said that aggressive advocacy for it might help, but above all, it has to be shown to work.

One interviewee turned the above argument on its head by suggesting that a good approach to advocacy would be to ask evaluation services to highlight the impact of a lack of communication when projects do not succeed as planned.

This suggestion was particularly interesting because there have been numerous projects that have failed to engage the so-called beneficiaries in adopting new ways of doing things. An examination of final evaluations of projects in various sectors over the past 10-15 years could provide a wealth of information for arguing the case for Communication for Development. Obviously, this would not eliminate the need for proper evaluation of the impact of communication activities in projects that had used them.

There were many comments along the following lines: the need for a common conceptual understanding among communicators of what Communication for Development is. Reduce its broadness, tease out its important elements, and define them; work more closely with technical people and make practical proposals; not want to do communication for communication's sake; and take advantage of the now generally accepted policies in favour of participation, bottom-up, and human-centred development. These policies are not always realized in practice, often because of poor or lacking communication processes; this opens an entry point for advocating our discipline.

The 2006 survey showed an increased awareness compared to 1994 of the overall importance of communication both in and in favour of development, much more agreement that including it in projects was economically justified, and many less demands than in 1994 for data on the costs-benefits of including it. Nevertheless, it also indicated that a lot still remains to be done by specialists before Communication for Development will be generally mainstreamed in development work. In the 2006 survey, only one international development agency claimed to have

done so.

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[1] E.D. Klemke, R. Hollinger, A.D. Kline (ed) 1980. *Introductory readings in the philosophy of science*. Prometheus Books, New York

[2] Editor's note: for more information about the Communication for Development Roundtable, see Peter da Costa's article in this issue of Glocal Times.

[3] Editor's note: one of the three organizers of the WCCD. See [www.comminit.com](http://www.comminit.com)

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