



ARE WE COMMUNICATING DEVELOPMENT?

Alfonso Gumucio Dagon



The World Congress of Communication for Development (WCCD) took place in Rome, at FAO's headquarters, late October 2006. Among all the international conferences on communication for development I have attended, this one was unique: it was organized by the World Bank, FAO and The Communication Initiative, institutions of very different nature that have little in common in their approach to development. With 700 hundred participants (government officials, international development organizations, NGOs and communication networks) from all regions in the world, the WCCD faced the risk of becoming a Tower of Babel where each delegate would speak his or her own language and ideas without caring much about what others would say. In fact, this is what often happens in international meetings, but it would have been sad if it happened during a communication conference, where dialogue is supposed to be central.

The congress in Rome was preceded by shadows and uncertainty. During two years, the three organizing institutions maintained a difficult relationship, mediated by the interests of each of them and by the very high expectations of the communication for development international community, which had hoped that the congress would shatter once and for all the barrier of misunderstanding that affects communication for social change approaches in large organizations.

I must say it in plain words: the communication model still dominating most of the international development and cooperation agencies, both bilateral and multilateral, is characterized by its verticality and its eagerness for visibility. There are some exceptions: both UNESCO and FAO have contributed important reflections on communication for development and have supported concrete programmes in developing countries in the Third World. In spite of institutional changes –i.e., even if its 1995 organizational reshuffle placed communication for development in a subsidiary position-, to date FAO has maintained the direction that during the 1970s was inspired by Colin Fraser and Silvia Balit. However, immediately after the WCCD, FAO bureaucrats decided to make the Communication for Development Unit, which had already been

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downgraded since 1995, “disappear”. Bureaucrats just don’t get it.

The record of other multilateral and bilateral agencies is mostly deplorable. UNICEF has specialised in institutional self-promotion to rise funding, thus impairing the advances that programme communication had achieved during the tenure of James Grant as Executive Director. Little can be said about the other cooperation agencies: communication has never been a priority in their agendas. They equal communication to self-promotion.

The enormous ignorance about communication that persists within development organizations is one of the factors that contribute to the stagnation and backward movement perceptible in the field in recent years. Colin Fraser himself pointed this out during one of the WCCD plenary sessions in Rome (I quote by heart): “Now everybody seems to confuse communication with advertising, marketing or anything else. Twenty years ago we knew the differences.” And he is right. The first confusion is between communication and information. Many development agencies invest in information activities, but not in communication; they prioritise the diffusion of messages through mass media instead of participatory communication processes that would allow communities to appropriate communication as a right, and thus to participate in programmes and projects as subjects and not just objects of development. Unfortunately, the principles of communication for social change, based on dialogue and participation, are not well understood by the larger development agencies.

Which is why it was a risky bet to meet in Rome and prompt dialogue between old-fashioned development officials who conceive development purely in economic and vertical terms, and activists and promoters of a different approach to communication: another communication for another development?

Within organisations such as the World Bank and even FAO, deep conceptual differences still exist that became apparent during the WCCD as much as they did earlier, during the stage of preparation. There are bureaucrats within the World Bank that do not want to hear the word “participation” in spite of the fact that James Wolfensohn himself, the President of the World Bank until last year, placed participation as an important topic in the agenda of the organisation. There are, on the other hand, some progressive World Bank officials trying to change the organisation from within, supporting communication for social change and participatory approaches such as community radio. Similar differences of opinion can be found within FAO, in spite of this organisation’s leading role in the field in the past.

The presence of The Communication Initiative among the organizers of the WCCD was an element of balance and openness. This virtual organization is responsible for the most important website on communication for development in the world, with thousands of pages on experiences, theory, debate, and specialised information on health, environment, children, human rights, etc. The Communication Initiative generates specialised bulletins and maintains pages for networking and debating, involving several thousands of readers worldwide. Besides its global site, a special site for Latin America has been developed in Spanish, *La iniciativa de la comunicación*, as well as a website for Africa, Soul Beat. The Communication Initiative is the space for all communicators for development spread out in the world to meet and interact. Its contributions to the reflection have been central.

The WCCD was tainted a priori by some of the aspects discuss above, and that explains why the expectations of some participants –myself included- were not very high. However, the three days of work proved that some ground was gained. To start, the list of 700 hundred guests and attendants showed that –unlike other international conferences where governments, development and civil society organisations compete for visibility- we had here a very balanced participation from all regions in the world, with a great diversity of organisations and, above all, with a wide range of points of view. Certainly, the purpose was not to gather all those already converted, to self-congratulate ourselves as we usually do in our monothematic meetings, but to favour dialogue and debate among those that do not think alike.

In my view, the WCCD had a positive outcome in spite of the institutional disputes for space and visibility. I believe we all gained ground.

First of all, the concept of communication for social change earned more attention in the development agendas. For the first time, decision makers and officials from development organisations had the opportunity to discuss communication approaches that are different from those they are used to. This may now allow them to take into account a new perspective in programmes and projects that fall under their responsibility -although we must point that few high-ranking decision makers from the World Bank attended.

The three WCCD organisers were able to move ahead their bets. Though often recommendations from international events remain no more than a salute to the flag, changes could take place if the final document is promoted as a tool for accountability. For The Communication Initiative, the WCCD was a kind of baptism of fire, a successful conversion: until now a virtual organisation, with no face other than its website, The

Communication Initiative suddenly showed itself as a real organisation, with undeniable influence in the development world and the capacity to facilitate dialogue among the larger players and decision makers.

For the rest of us, communication activists and scholars of participatory communication approaches, for our organisations, networks and universities, for our praxis and our struggle for communication rights, the WCCD also had a positive result, because it legitimated our work and helped to position us as key actors in development. Besides, the three-day congress was an opportunity to meet -or to meet again, to exchange ideas and continue designing the communication strategy that we hope will make the difference between development without participation, and development as a process through people appropriate their future and their communication.

The final recommendations of the WCCD prove that some ground was gained. They clearly mention the need for development agencies and governments to review their position on communication as a factor of sustainable development, and to consider participatory approaches. Governments and development organisations are called to equip themselves with communication policies and strategies –other than information and institutional visibility activities- as an integral part of their programmes. They are encouraged to prove their genuine interest in communication for development by appointing specialised staff with a strategic vision to higher positions, and not only journalists to organise press conferences or draft press releases. Finally, the recommendations mention the need to allocate higher resources in the programmes' budgets for communication for development plans, so that communication is not merely a symbolic addition to ongoing activities. The very last lines of the recommendations underline that processes have to put the right to communicate in the centre, a fundamental step forward from previous declarations where only “access to information” is mentioned.

This Congress was not a gathering of those already convinced, but a dialogue to open new doors to communication policies and strategies based in participatory approaches. I guess that this was achieved.

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