



REMEMBERING COLIN FRASER

Silvia Balit



Colin Fraser passed away at the age of 73 on 15 September 2008. He was among the pioneers in the use of communication for development, a relatively new discipline on the development scene.

In 1969 Colin was working for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), organising reportage missions for journalists, when he was appointed to set up and lead a Development Support Communication Unit (as the discipline was initially called). In those days little was known about how to communicate with illiterate people in rural areas of developing countries so, as Colin used to say, it was like painting on an empty canvas. The team started working without preconceived ideas or dogmas, learning by doing, learning from mistakes as well as from successful initiatives. Transfer of technology was the dominant paradigm, so the majority of requests for assistance were for audio visual aids to support extension and training activities.

Colin instead was a great believer in participatory approaches and in the human dimensions of development. He believed that development is about people and not only about transferring technology. Thus slowly, the Unit began to promote a wider concept of communication, beginning with situation analysis and participatory planning with the so called project beneficiaries, to promote social change. Communication techniques were applied more creatively, taking into account the perceptions of rural people and the realities of rural areas. The media applied were appropriate to social and economic conditions in rural areas in developing countries such as rural radio, slide sets and filmstrips, portable video and multi media campaigns. For example, in Peru a methodology based on the use of video for the large scale training of illiterate farmers was developed. It was replicated in many other countries. And in Mexico, a large integrated rural development program, PRODERITH, established a rural communication system for participatory planning and training. The World Bank considered the program to be among the most successful projects it supported, and was on record as having stated that the rural communication system had been instrumental to that success.

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Colin left FAO in 1984 to join Agrisystems, an agricultural consulting firm. But he continued to collaborate with the FAO Unit as a consultant. In 1987 he facilitated an Expert Consultation that analysed the state of the art after some 17 years of pragmatic experience. The principles and guidelines developed at that meeting are still valid today. The fact that three communication specialists received the B.R.Sen Award, an award given by FAO to its best field experts, is recognition of the discipline as a specialised field in development, but also a tribute to Colin's contribution. Over the years he worked in more than sixty countries and with most development agencies. But possibly one of his most important contributions was the book he co-authored with his wife Sonia, "Communicating for Development - Human Change for Survival". In recent years he devoted himself to interpersonal and group communication techniques for participatory planning, for qualitative research and situation analysis.

Colin was a born communicator. He was articulate and a gifted writer. He was curious, genuinely interested in people and a good listener. He especially enjoyed going to the field and talking with farmers and communities in rural areas. His writings were not academic, but full of human stories and anecdotes.

In 1989 he visited the areas covered by the PRODERITH rural communication system and met many of the participating communities, organisations and individuals. According to the project manager he said "The main challenge faced by a good communication system in the field is not, as one may think, filling a social space with words; it consists in the establishment of an initial silence, where the actors present recognize each other as equals, with the same rights and possibilities for generating the new knowledge required to improve the quality of their life and working conditions". In essence this quote reflects his philosophy for communication for development.

Although committed to his profession, he also had many other interests. His motto was "work hard and play hard". Whether it was piloting a plane, riding his motorcycle, skiing, trekking in the mountains, touring the countryside, cooking a hot curry or making wine, there was never a dull moment.

His many friends and colleagues will never forget his joie de vivre, his sense of humour and his courage during the years of his illness. His death is a great loss for the profession as well as for his many friends and colleagues.

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Silvia Balit, from Italy, has many years of experience in the field of communication for development and social change. Her professional career has been devoted to working for the UN system, first with the United Nations in New York, and then with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Rome. Together with Colin Fraser, she pioneered the Development Support Communication program in FAO. Between 1984 and 1998 she was in charge of FAO's Communication for Development program. In this capacity, she led many initiatives aimed at strengthening rural communication systems in Africa, Asia, the Near East and Latin America to promote sustainable development and social change.

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