



COMMUNICATING WITH DECISION MAKERS

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The 11th United Nations Inter-Agency Roundtable on Communication for Development, held in Washington in 2009, had as its theme “Moving Communication for Development up the International Development Agenda: Demonstrating Impact and strengthening the Institutional Position”. The Roundtable approved three interrelated priorities for recognizing communication as a fundamental component in development: advocacy with policy makers; monitoring and evaluation to demonstrate impact; and training of communication for development professionals; and agreed to formulate and implement a common strategy. In this article, Silvia Balit provides some personal reflections on the obstacles that exist, and contributes ideas for the development and implementation of an advocacy strategy.

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THE DEVELOPMENT LANDSCAPE

Communication for development has come of age. No longer the young, emerging discipline it was when it started some 50 years ago, it has gained experience and demonstrated results in hundreds of community-based projects and programs. And, in the last two decades, the information revolution has provided us with ever more powerful technologies. Cutting-edge communication technologies and the media are pervasive and in the forefront. Yet ironically, communication for development is still marginalized as a partner in the development process. Communication strategies are designed as an afterthought, rather than integrated from the start in development programs, and are given too few resources. Communication for development is like the fifth wheel on the cart: the moment there is a budget cut, there it goes.

Development itself is not doing so well either. Over the years millions have been spent with few results. The development industry has failed to either reduce poverty or promote economic growth with equity, especially in Africa. Donor inspired policies and agendas have made governments mere beneficiaries of aid rather than active participants in their own countries' development agenda.

In their book “Communication for Another Development, Listening before Telling”, Ricardo Ramirez and Wendy Quarry (2009) refer to the principles promoted by the Dag Hammarskøld Foundation in the mid 1970s for “another development”, setting out new parameters for development thinking: that development be geared to the satisfaction of needs, beginning with the eradication of poverty; that it be endogenous and self reliant; that it be in harmony with the environment and that it contribute to structural change. Today, still too few development programs apply these principles. A new development system is called for, more people-centered and responding effectively to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged, to a changing environment and to new issues.

Recognizing the need for change, as a start development cooperation is moving away from donor driven approaches designed in the North to country-led systems. The focus is on country programs that emphasize community participation, ownership, capacity building and aid effectiveness. Harmonization and coordination of efforts are also considered essential, and within the UN system the emphasis is now to “deliver as one”, rather than each UN agency working on its own. Often these are still declarations of intent rather than actual practice.

In terms of coordination, the Millennium Development Goals, with a major focus on poverty reduction, are the reference point for the majority of multilateral and bilateral institutions. But with only six years to go until 2015, development efforts are not fulfilling the promises made to reduce poverty and improve poor people’s livelihoods. Despite progress in some areas, there are still more than 1 billion people living in extreme poverty and suffering from hunger and malnutrition. In addition, there are new and pressing challenges such as climate change, scarcity of fresh water, armed conflicts, mass migration, and religious fundamentalisms. These are all people-oriented issues that require participation, dialogue and ownership if they are to be met. Thus communication is key and central. Yet, communication is absent from the MDGs.

Why are development efforts lagging behind goals? Political and economic analysts have provided many answers, ranging from geographic conditions, climate change or the global financial and economic crisis to civil wars, corruption and dictatorships. Few have pointed to the lack of communication and information processes¹. Yet, development is about people becoming their own agents of change, accessing ideas, knowledge and skills to fulfill their potential, and having the opportunity to be heard, even according to the World Bank. In 2000, the WB carried out a survey to determine what people living in poverty said they wanted and needed most. The most common response was that having a voice, a say in

decisions that affected them, was a priority, second only to improved income and basic necessities².

But national and international development partners have yet to recognize the power and potential of communication processes to contribute to eliminating poverty and promoting sustainable development.

THE UN INTER-AGENCY ROUNDTABLES ON COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

The UN Inter Agency Roundtable is an instrument to promote communication for development within the UN system, and to coordinate efforts. The first Roundtable, organized by UNICEF in 1988, was attended by a small number of UN Agencies active in the field (UNESCO, UNICEF, FAO and UNFPA) and a few representatives of CSOs from North America, as an informal mechanism for exchanging knowledge and experiences and promoting cooperation. Roundtables are organized every two years, and now include participants from bilateral aid agencies, NGOs, CSOs and universities in addition to UN agencies. They are the main inter-agency professional consultation mechanism on communication for development.

Following an evaluation by the UN Joint Inspection Unit in 1994, the usefulness of the Roundtables was recognized by the UN. Deliberations now form part of the UN Secretary General's bi-annual report to the General Assembly on Communication for Development, based on the report submitted by UNESCO as coordinating agency.

Recurring themes over the years have included mobilizing decision makers' support for communication for development; training operational and policy staff at country level and at headquarters, evaluation of communication for development projects, and the role of media in development. Until recently, there has been little concrete follow-up action and coordination of efforts. Agencies and institutions have continued to work according to their individual policies and mandates, and these issues are still on the agenda as challenges.

The last Roundtables have sought to build on the UN's commitment to greater inter-agency coordination and collaboration as reflected in the new strategic planning instruments –the Common Country Assessment (CCA) and the United Nations Development Framework (UNDAF), following the 1997 reform process. Also, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) are increasingly being used by many governments as the central

strategic framework within which all partners, multilateral and bilateral, agree to work to meet the MDGs. PRSPs are intended to be the result of consultations at the community level, but there is some question as to whether this is really happening. For the purpose of consultation, communication processes at the community level would be needed.

Participants at the 10th and 11th Roundtables agreed to develop a common strategy and tools to strengthen the role of communication as a key component of UN system programming and in support of the MDGs. The 11th Roundtable held in Washington in 2009, “Moving Communication for Development up the International Development Agenda: Demonstrating Impact and strengthening the Institutional Position”, approved three interrelated priorities for recognizing communication as a fundamental component in development: advocacy with policy makers; monitoring and evaluation to demonstrate impact; and training of communication for development professionals.

The Roundtable also approved a series of concrete follow-up activities to address these key challenges. Thus, the process of formulating and implementing a shared UN strategy for these three issues has begun. In what follows I share some personal reflections on the obstacles that exist, and contribute some ideas for the development and implementation of a common strategy.

NOT UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

One of the problems is that the majority of decision makers in development institutions still do not have a correct understanding of what communication for development is all about, as documented by a number of surveys carried out to identify their perceptions. In 1994, at the request of a UN Roundtable, a survey was carried out by Colin Fraser and Arne Fjortoft among decision makers in governments, bilateral and multilateral aid agencies and NGOs, financed by UNICEF and WHO. In 2003, Ricardo Ramirez and Wendy Quarry interviewed 13 decision makers, sponsored by IDRC. In 2006 a survey was carried out by Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo among 43 policy makers, sponsored by the World Bank. In addition, the OECD Development Centre has implemented a survey on communication for development among donors. The results of these studies are important for planning an advocacy strategy.

Communication for development is about people, not about wires (as Anamaria Decock used to say). Many development planners and

governments are fascinated by cutting edge technology, and believe that having a website and access to new ICTs is all that is required to say that they are using communication for development purposes. But communication for development is more than satellite television, community radio, mobile phones, ICTs and the Internet. It can use all these resources, but it is primarily about people and making use of them in a social process to facilitate change.

Communication for development is a rich and complex discipline with a broad range of functions ranging from dissemination of information for individual behavior change, to participatory communication for empowerment and social change within communities. It can cover a wide range of approaches and activities in different situations. This is possibly one of the reasons why policy makers and program managers find it difficult to understand its role in development.

Communication practitioners have reached a common understanding on the major principles governing the discipline. The days of polemics related to different approaches and methodologies are over. Following the Rome Consensus adopted at the World Congress on Communication for Development held in Rome in 2006, communication for development today is generally recognized as a social process, based on dialogue and using a broad range of tools and methods. It is about seeking change, sharing knowledge and skills, and enabling people to set their own agendas and take informed decisions. It is a soft and social science that has to do with listening, building trust and respecting local cultures -not easy concepts to understand for policy makers and program managers with a background in hard sciences.

Notwithstanding general agreement on the basic principles, individual institutions and agencies have their own definitions and approaches, in accordance with their specific mandates. Although at the 3rd UN Inter-Agency Roundtable, organized by FAO in 1991, communication for development generally was proposed as the term to overcome this problem, becoming the official terminology at the Roundtables, there are still many different names to identify the discipline. No wonder there is confusion and questions. Different names reflecting different approaches include development communication; development support communication; communication for development; information, education and communication; social marketing; participatory communication and more recently communication for social change; communication for behavioral and social change; environmental communication; and now climate change communication.

Another cause for confusion comes from the fact that today

'communication' is used to mean 'public information', and many communication for development units are still located in corporate communication and external relations departments. Like politicians and business people, decision makers in development institutions know well the importance of information and communication activities, but primarily in connection with public relations or corporate communication. In some cases policy makers do understand the advantage of using communication in development programs, but they tend to be interested only in producing messages to disseminate information and tell people what to do, rather than listening and giving people a voice. Eliminating the confusion between communication for development, publicity and corporate communication is essential for the correct understanding of the discipline.

We communicators have the tendency to use jargon and theoretical concepts when we write and speak. This may be fine for other communicators and in the academic world, but it does not facilitate understanding for anyone outside our discipline. We know well that we must tailor our message and our language to our audience, but we are often abstract instead of being concrete and concise when addressing development professionals from technical sectors and policy makers. We must provide them with specific examples of how the communication process is planned and actually done in the field... Policy makers come from different professional backgrounds, so we must learn to speak their language, in accordance with their experiences.

Another problem arises from the nature of the discipline. Communication is as old as mankind itself. We can all share messages, and thus there is a perception that communication for development is "easy to do", and that it is something that just anyone without professional experience can do well. Program managers do not see it as an area requiring technical expertise.

A common understanding of the discipline and its functions is essential for advocacy and mainstreaming.

A POLITICAL PROCESS

Development is basically political. And so is communication, especially when it deals with change and with political and social injustices. This is why political will to put it into practice on the part of governments and local authorities is often lacking. After all, enabling poor communities to

participate directly challenges existing power structures.

The powerful images of the protests and the repression in Iran following the elections spread through the web in real time thanks to social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. Social networks kept the opposition movements and unrest going until the government started censoring discussion and blocked access to the Internet. The opposition leader Moussavi has created a new grassroots and social movement through his website. Thus the government is facing a force hard to control: the empowerment of people through communication technology. More recently, the same can be said for online censorship in China and the confrontation with Google.

The presence or absence of free and pluralistic media is a political act. Countries that foster dialogue, debate and inclusion while encouraging free and open media are more likely to engage in participatory communication practices than more centrally controlled countries and authoritarian governments. The whole notion of good governance, transparency and accountability is political and depends on the willingness of those in power to share knowledge and information with citizens and civil society.

Access to technology and flows of information and images are increasing rapidly. Governments cannot ignore this and continue to exert control over them. They live in a global and networked world, thus they must recognize the right to communicate³.

CONSTRAINTS FOR PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION

Most development organizations and governments now acknowledge the importance of participation in development. Few will deny the value of participatory processes for working with the poor. But why then is it so difficult to promote participatory communication programs to alleviate poverty? The fact is that commitment to participatory approaches is often rhetoric, and not always put into practice. Participatory processes go against bureaucratic procedures and the goals of large aid institutions. Technical and scientific approaches prevail, and favor the dissemination of information and production of messages over participatory communication⁴.

Critics in development agencies object that participatory processes take time, require human resources and are costly. They are difficult to apply

within the rigid time line of project log frames and results-based management. Participatory processes will upset the well defined plan. Donors want quick results. Thus it is easier to implement an information campaign than develop a long-term communication process with the local people. Problems that have existed for years cannot be solved in a few months, or even two to three years. Processes of change take time, much more than provided for in typical development programs: successful FAO communication projects had a duration of seven to ten years. On the other hand, participation and ownership on the part of the communities involved are essential for sustainability. Thus, long-term perspectives for participatory communication are not as costly as the failure of expensive projects due to lack of the involvement and ownership on the part of the communities concerned⁵.

Donors are increasingly interested in scaling up and moving away from small “boutique” projects, and say that process and participatory communication programs cannot be scaled up and carried out at national level. It is true that these projects have value primarily at the local level. But the common principles governing their application such as listening, building trust, and respect for local cultures as well as the lessons learned can be shared, and adapted to national levels.

Ricardo Ramirez and Wendy Quarry (2009) argue that the development industry, supported by many governments, is based on a predictable planning approach. Because of their bureaucratic nature and attachment to the status quo, large aid systems will never really change from inside and apply participatory development approaches and communication. Whatever change comes will be due to pressure from the outside, whether from civil society or the context. In the meantime, Ramírez and Quarry argue, communication for development must relocate away from development bureaucracies working in the planning mode and to organizations and champions effectively working with participatory approaches and the principles of another development⁶.

There is also the question of political space. As mentioned earlier, participatory communication can only take place if there is political will on the part of governments and local authorities. This rarely happens with authoritarian or centrally controlled governments.

This article continues. See the second part.

1 Warnock Kitty, Emrys Shoemaker and Mark Wilson (2007) "The Case for Communication in Sustainable Development ". London, Panos Institute.

2 Narayana Deepa with Raj Patel, Kai Schafft, Anne Rademacher and Sara Koch-Schulte, 2000, "Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?", Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y.

3 Warnock Kitty, Emrys Shoemaker and Mark Wilson (2007) "The Case for Communication in Sustainable Development ". London, Panos Institute.

4 Silvio Waisbord, (2008) "The institutional challenges of participatory communication in international aid". Social Identities, Routledge Publisher, London. 5 Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, 2007, "Playing with Fire: Participatory Communication", CMS Symbols Conference, Hyderabad, November 2007.

6 Wendy Quarry and Ricardo Ramirez, (2009) "Communication for another Development, Listening before Telling". London and New York, Zed Books.

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