



COMMUNICATING WITH DECISION MAKERS (CONTINUED)

Silvia Balit



ISSUE 14
May 2010

SOME CHALLENGES IN MEASURING IMPACT

Measuring the impact of communication activities is closely related to advocacy. The implications of surveys on the perception of policy makers is that the only way to convince them to devote additional resources to communication is by providing them with concrete examples of the impact and cost-benefits of communication. Simply saying that we need more communication will not be persuasive. We need to demonstrate the value of communication in achieving the priority goals they are interested in through hard facts and results of evaluations. But demonstrating impact is complex. Only a limited number of interventions have been adequately monitored and evaluated.

Cause and communication effect are difficult to measure, and one of the most serious obstacles to evaluating communication activities. Activities rarely occur in a vacuum, and people obtain knowledge and information from other sources than a communication program. It is difficult to separate the contribution of a communication component from the outcomes of the program it supports. In some cases it is possible to measure changes in knowledge, behavior, attitudes and access and use of services, including what portion of the change can be attributed to a communication initiative -for example, agricultural production, uptake of an irrigation practice, use of condoms, more child immunizations or girls attending school-, especially when measuring the outcome of short term interventions, having a baseline and specific goals.

Assessing the impact of communication has been made even more difficult by the current practice of donors, who require evaluation to be carried out before the end of projects, when the effects of communication activities might only have begun to produce results. Donors want visible results within the relatively short timeframe (3 to 5 years) of programs, while

communication processes take much longer to achieve. Long-term outcomes would require long-term studies that focus on processes of change. But donors and program managers rarely have the time and resources for such in-depth analysis.

A variety of methods are applied to measure the impact and effectiveness of communication in development programs. Quantitative approaches predominate, since decision makers in development institutions are usually hard scientists and demand evidence of results and cost effectiveness based on numbers and statistics.

But counting and hard data cannot truly capture the complexity of social processes over longer periods of time, and thus statistics are not always helpful in evaluating communication and development outcomes if one considers goals such as community participation, empowerment, ownership and social change. For these processes, qualitative methods, based on how and why questions, individual opinions, stories, testimonials, and verbal analysis, can be considered more effective for measurement.

Many qualitative methods are already being applied such as Ethnographic Research, Anthropological Research, and Outcome Mapping. Video testimonials and stories told by communities can also provide important qualitative data to share information with policy makers. The Most Significant Change method is an example of a narrative based approach.

A rigid distinction between quantitative and qualitative is an artificial separation and can be too restrictive. Both are valid analytical frameworks, and should be selected and combined in accordance with the context, audience, and the objective of the evaluation. Whatever perspective one might hold, numerical or verbal analysis, communication evaluation benefits from both and needs both approaches.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The institutional framework for communication for development has always been problematic, right from the beginning, within the UN system, among donor institutions and at country level. The multi-disciplinary and cross-cutting nature of the discipline has not helped.

Within the UN system, UNESCO has been an exception, and benefited from the fact that communication is part of its mandate and vision. Thus information and communication have been recognized as a sector and

integrated in its policies, work and budget, with a critical mass of professional staff.

In other UN agencies and among development partners there have been ups and down, and in some cases communication for development simply does not exist. Debate is still ongoing as to where the discipline should be located, whether together with public information/ corporate communication or in program and technical departments; whether it should be a stand-alone, autonomous division or section, or integrated into technical programs. In the case of FAO, communication for development was initially within the Public Information Division as an autonomous program, and then in later years was integrated as a program in a technical department. Even today there is ongoing debate about its role and institutional location. Just recently it has been relocated to the Office of Knowledge Exchange, together with Research and Extension, and directly under the Deputy Director General responsible for Knowledge. In UNDP, communication for development is dealt with by the Oslo Governance Center, which reports to the UN Office responsible for UN coordinators and Country Teams.

The past two years have witnessed a strong organizational commitment to revitalizing communication for development in UNICEF. The discipline has been recognized as a key cross-cutting strategy in UNICEF's Medium-Term Strategic Plan, and at headquarters a Communication for Development Unit is now strategically located within the Policy and Practice Group. A four-year Strategic Framework and a Capability Development Framework are now in place, and communication is being integrated into key organizational programs, policies and guidelines. A vision, mission and guiding principles have been formulated for use at regional and country levels. During the last year, regional meetings of UNICEF representatives in Africa and Asia were held, as well as a global network meeting of some 122 staff and representatives from eighty six countries and seven regions. The objectives of these meetings were advocacy, sharing experiences and lessons from communication initiatives; and obtaining commitment for strategic directions and future activities. This is a truly positive institutional framework that could become a model for other UN organizations.

At the country level, it is even more important for governments to establish the enabling environment for the planning and implementation of communication for development strategies. Communication for development should be led and owned by governments, and not only by the UN system and donors. Each situation will be different, but the multidisciplinary nature of the discipline means that all sectors involved in poverty alleviation and sustainable development should participate.

At the national level, Ministries of Information have the media structures required, but not always qualified communication for development staff. The opposite may apply to other Ministries such as Agriculture or Rural Development: they may have communication units, but lack infrastructure and need orientation in their conceptual approach, and staff training. The situation in many countries where individual ministries conduct their own communication work is not cost-effective, and the lack of coordination causes confusion. A unique development is now taking place in Latin America, in Paraguay, where a Ministry of Information and Communication for Development has been established by the government of President Lugo. This is the first of its kind in Latin America, and possibly globally.

National communication policies have been introduced in a number of countries in Africa to articulate and regulate the role of communication in rural development, and have projected different institutional frameworks for the discipline. A common solution proposed would be for national programs to be established in a location which would enable them to participate in situation analysis and program planning, as well as to develop national communication strategies. This could be in a Planning Ministry or, as the case in Paraguay, a Ministry of Information and Communication for Development. Such national communication programs would work with all the partners engaged in development and provide technical support in the fields of communication planning, evaluation and training. The production and use of communication materials would remain the responsibility of individual institutions in the governmental, non-governmental and private sectors.

A number of community-based initiatives have promoted new institutional frameworks, involving all partners, including the public and private sectors. These were established as autonomous, income-generating bodies that have applied marketing principles and techniques as well as business plans to ensure their economic sustainability.

What actually happens in a given country will be a matter for negotiation among different partners and social forces in the development context. But generally, the best solution lies in putting together a mix of organizations –including the government, NGOs, the private sector and civil society organizations.

A NEW PROFILE

Another constraint for mainstreaming and upgrading the discipline is the lack of qualified communication for development professionals. During

recent surveys, several policy makers stated that one of the reasons for the low profile of the discipline was the lack of competent staff with strategic planning capacity.

Communication for development has become a specialized discipline, often labeled as being part science, part art and part craft. It draws upon social and behavioral sciences such as anthropology, sociology, marketing, education, and psychology, and requires professionals who, in addition to knowledge of media and information technology, also have an understanding of communication processes, including research, monitoring and evaluation and development, and are familiar with the social, cultural, political and economic contexts in developing countries.

In addition, if we look at some of the “champions” of the past they have had some common attributes besides their technical field of specialization: a lifetime commitment to development and to working with the poor, an ability to listen and see things from their perspective, and the capacity to work in the field, in rural areas, in difficult conditions⁷.

Often communication for development posts in development organizations are filled with professionals with backgrounds in media, public relations or journalism. A standard job description, identifying the specific competencies required, would help to avoid this.

The development of human resources is needed at all levels -from field workers up to communication planners and managers. For example, there is much still to be done to change the attitudes of extensionists who have been educated to apply top-down, authoritarian approaches. As programs evolve from technology transfer to participatory processes of social change, the role of the communication practitioner in the field also changes, and becomes that of a facilitator, a mediator and a broker linking different partners. Thus, in-service training and new skills are required, including among others participatory situation analysis, qualitative research methods, group facilitation, group dynamics and conflict resolution.

There is also need for in-service refresher courses to upgrade the quality of intermediate communication professionals working in development institutions or in the field. But what is really missing are high level communication planners and managers: the kind of professional who can advocate for the discipline with senior decision makers. These are rarely provided by universities that focus on media, even though they use the term ‘communication studies’. Some 2,000 universities have programs that are media oriented, producing about 50,000 journalists a year, whereas there are less than 20 universities in the world that have

programs in communication for development. Journalism is a different kettle of fish from communication for development⁸.

An important step forward has been that a group of universities, with programs in communication for development and social change, came together in 2005 to start a network to share experiences and jointly develop curricula, with inputs from various fields.

The problem, however, is not only one of curricula, but of advocating with deans and presidents of departments and universities to include the discipline in their graduate and postgraduate programs, and of finding the financial resources. Paraguay is again an interesting example: at the moment there are five universities planning BA courses in communication for development and one MA graduate course.

SOME NOTES FOR A SHARED STRATEGY

The issue of advocacy with decision makers has been on the agenda for many years - actually, since Erskine Childers first started advocacy within the UN system in the late sixties. He had considerable success, with UNICEF, UNDP, FAO and UNFPA starting programs. In addition, UNDP project documents included a mandatory section on Development Support Communication, as it was then named. But now, forty years later, a strong and bold advocacy strategy is needed, focused on strengthening the legitimacy of the discipline and its institutional place, and on making communication an integral component of development policy and activities. How communication is perceived in fact determines policy, funding, staffing and activities.

As already mentioned, the last UN Inter-Agency Roundtable agreed that there should be a common UN strategy for advocacy. Notwithstanding sectoral differences, the principles governing the discipline can form the basis of a shared vision and strategy. A joint advocacy strategy would not be limited to support for specific sectors and projects, but aim at promoting a wider concept of communication as a cross-cutting sector in development. Each agency would then complement the strategy and link the value of communication to its specific mandate and requirements.

Since contexts and audiences differ, there is no “off the shelf” model to establish a dialogue with the people involved in decision-making. It is important to know your audience, and surveys on the perceptions of decision makers have enabled us to know their opinions. There are differences in multilateral and bilateral agencies, but above all there are

differences in countries.

The benefits of communication should be linked to development priorities: poverty alleviation, the Millennium Development Goals, climate change, and so forth.

Not a magic wand

Information, knowledge and communication should not be presented as magic wands. In the 70s, the emphasis was on the use of mass media, as if transfer of information and technology would eliminate poverty. Information, knowledge and communication are essential but not sufficient elements to address poverty. Structural change is also required. Farmers in many countries are now using cell phones to check on prices in nearby markets, and receiving text messages on their cell phones about how to diagnose and treat local crop diseases. But information can never substitute for structural change. The extent to which subsistence farmers can benefit from the opportunities that information can provide will vary according to other factors such as ownership of the land, proximity of markets, available means of transportation and their productive resources.

Be creative

A mix of different approaches will be required, combining the results of quantitative and qualitative evaluations, case studies, stories and testimonials. Creative and innovative examples from the past 50 years to illustrate what works best and show results can be selected. Following the last UN Inter-Agency Roundtable, UNESCO has taken the lead to coordinate examples of best practices.

What is required now is to package all this information in a manner that is understandable by non-communication specialists: short and simple presentations, based on facts, using the media those specialists prefer and the right language. Communication is an art, and all the tools at hand should be employed in a professional and creative manner. A position paper or a booklet, as recommended by the last Roundtable, are not enough - a multi-media approach should be applied. Seeing is believing, and decision makers do not have much time to read. In FAO, we had success with a professionally produced video entitled "Sharing Knowledge" which was shown to the Director General and to high level staff, accompanied by a booklet, "Communication a Key to Human Development", constituting an effective advocacy package.

In addition to demonstrating the value of communication, and how it makes a difference, one could describe the immense cost of not investing in communication. There are examples of disastrous failures when communication was not used or not used properly. In FAO we started several of our advocacy programs with examples of the effects of the failure to use communication, showing the waste of time and money resulting from not including communication in planning and strategies.

HOW TO START

Be realistic

We know that providing evidence is not enough. Other dimensions, such as institutional cultures, mandates, power structures inside governments and development partners, as well as the diverging interests of different stakeholders, must be taken into account in formulating advocacy strategies. Advocacy for placing communication and people's participation at the heart of development processes must recognize the reality that exists in many centrally controlled governments and development institutions.

A work in progress

Efforts at advocacy should not be once only, but continuing and a work in progress. Decision makers in institutions and governments change, and when they do, the advocacy efforts must start again with the new incumbents.

Meetings

Many ideas were shared during the last UN Inter-Agency Roundtable on how to start joint advocacy efforts. An obvious one was to organize a meeting of UN policy makers to present the strategy -the World Congress on Communication for Development held in 2006 did not really succeed in doing this. Influential UN representatives who believe in communication for development could be mobilized to share their experiences on how communication can make the difference. There are also a number of committed "champions", who have devoted their professional lives to communication, who could provide testimonials.

Another idea would be to organize a meeting of donors, along the lines of a gathering that was sponsored some years ago by DANIDA. According to

the survey carried out by the OECD Development Centre, of the donors interviewed one third has integrated communication for development (only three have a strategy, fewer include monitoring and evaluation of impact), one third are planning to include it, and the remaining third do not have plans to include it. These meetings should be organized in the field, where it would be possible to observe the results of a communication for development program.

Partnerships

It could be useful to expand the partners involved in this cause in order to avoid that it looks like a corporative issue, raised and promoted only by communication for development professionals. Representatives of development foundations, such as e.g. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, could contribute by sponsoring communication for development activities. Private sector companies could do the same. For example, the Grameen Foundation, Google and the South African cell phone company MTN recently came together in a joint venture to launch a service that will provide farmers with local weather forecasts and farming information, together with other useful information like health advice⁹.

In addition, partnerships and joint ventures with international Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) dealing with communication for development and media, such as e.g. The Communication Initiative, Panos, the Communication for Social Change Consortium, as well as universities that have Communication for Development programs, should be strengthened and expanded.

In the countries

Above all, there is need to involve decision makers and technical staff from developing countries.

The emergence of new programming instruments – the Common Country Assessment (CCA), Poverty Reduction strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF)- provides a good entry point for assisting governments to integrate communication for development from the start and identify appropriate institutional frameworks, legislation and policies. There has been a proposal to include communication for development in the UNDAF Guidelines that are currently being drafted or revised in some 90 country offices. A paper on this subject was presented by UNDP to the last UN Inter-Agency Roundtable, identifying specific entry points in the guidelines. This is an excellent idea, provided that the component is drafted by a

communication professional, emphasizing the importance of communication components in turn being planned and implemented by communication professionals with knowledge and experience in the discipline. I remember the problems encountered when many years ago UNDP included a mandatory section “J” for development support communication in its project plan of operations. Very few project planners and managers understood the concept, but since they were obliged to fill out the item, they included the production of audiovisual reports to submit to donors. That section did more harm than good.

It was proposed at the last UN Inter-Agency Roundtable to start in countries where there are some success stories and good practices, such as e.g. Rwanda, Pakistan, and Mozambique, and where the “Delivering as One” pilot initiative is being implemented. Building upon strength is important: in Mozambique there is a UN Communication Working Group that has coordinated and planned a series of multimedia activities for the empowerment of people, families, communities and service providers. The Working Group includes communication staff from a number of UN agencies and provides a framework for speaking in a unified voice and implementing a common communication strategy. This effective model could be replicated in other “Delivering as One” countries. However, Working Groups should also include major NGOS, CSOs and other development cooperation partners involved in development communication, as well as government representatives. UN Resident Coordinators in these countries could be requested to report on UN agency, NGO and donor-supported communication for development initiatives in the country, including funds provided, training, etc.

A learning framework

The last UN Inter-Agency Roundtable agreed to develop and implement a common learning framework on communication for development to enhance the capacity of UN agencies as well as governments and external actors. To begin with, it was agreed to produce a common training course for intermediate program officers, managers and communication practitioners to last a week and be held at the International Labor Organization (ILO) Training Centre in Turin.

Policy makers and donors do not have much time to spare. Thus, models for short orientation courses, accompanied by tool kits, would be the solution for UN high level staff, government policy makers and donors. In the short term, the UN Inter-Agency Roundtable agreed to include communication components in existing briefing and training sessions for UN senior management and representatives. A specific orientation pilot course would be produced at a later date, aimed also at national decision

makers.

Field staff needs longer periods of training if they are to practically apply interactive and participatory methods with communities new.

Communication planners and managers who can advocate at the level of high level policy makers would normally be university graduates, although there are exceptions to the rule. The more universities include communication for development curricula, the more the discipline will gain legitimacy. But some have said that this is a “chicken and egg” question. If the discipline does not have recognition in development institutions, where will all the university graduates be placed? According to the Dean of the University of Los Baños in the Philippines, where the first-ever graduate course in development communication was established, there are continuous requests for their students. Years ago, employers would never have included communication in their classified ads. Now, there is a marked demand for development communication professionals in fields like agriculture, forestry, local governance, labor, tourism, foreign service, health and nutrition... This is most likely an indication that appreciation of the profession has grown, also as a result of the university program.

The success or failure of communication for development will depend on the ability to provide good human resources.

Measuring impact

The last UN Inter-Agency Roundtable agreed to produce a series of indicators that are valid across UN agencies and to develop a common Monitoring and Evaluation framework for Communication for Development.

There is general agreement that both quantitative and qualitative methods are required to measure outcomes and process. The difficulty to assess the impact of communication processes through qualitative methods is a challenge, although many approaches already exist. But even more challenging is the need to convince donors and policy makers to accept qualitative research instruments as valid to demonstrate that communication makes a difference. However, the problem does not come down only to indicators and a methodological framework. It is also important for institutions and donors to understand that communities must be involved in the planning and implementation of monitoring and evaluation. Indicators must be drawn up locally, in accordance with the communities' objectives and not only with the agenda of the institution

and the donor. What communities define as “development” may not necessarily fit institutional criteria for indicators.

Indicators should be simple and concrete, so that they may be easily applied in the field, together with the beneficiaries. To this end, the evaluator should be a process facilitator in a joint learning effort, rather than a researcher coming from outside to measure. The evaluation team should always include someone able to use the local language, and familiar with the local context. Culture is important and not taken sufficiently into account in planning evaluation efforts.

It is also important to advocate with donors to foresee sufficient time and resources for research and monitoring and evaluation efforts, especially when dealing with participatory approaches for social change. Partnerships with universities can provide the expertise and human resources required.

IN CONCLUSION

We have the know-how. We have the experience and the results of measurable outcomes. We know how policy makers perceive the discipline... Establishing a dialogue with policy makers to integrate communication is an urgent priority if the Millennium Development Goals and other pressing issues on the global agenda are to be met.

This article was adapted from a presentation given by the author to UNESCO's Information and Communication Sector on 1 October, 2009.

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. silvia.balit@mclink.it

7 Ramirez R. and Quarry W. 2009, Communication for Another Development, Zed Books, London

8 Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, 2007, "Playing with Fire: Participatory Communication", CMS Symbols Conference, Hyderabad, November 2007

9 G&D News N.88, 6 August 2009. Hillary Clinton's speech to AWARD winning women agricultural researchers.

Towards a Common UN System Approach – Achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Report of the 10th UN Inter-Agency Roundtable on Communication for Development. February 2007, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. UNESCO, Paris

Strengthening the Institutional Position of Communication for Development . Report of the 11th Meeting of the United Nations Inter-Agency Roundtable on Communication for Development. March 2009, Washington DC, U.S.A. UNDP and World Bank.

Fitting the Glass Slipper! Institutionalising Communication for Development within the UN. A background paper for the 11th UN Inter-Agency Round Table on Communication for Development. March 2009, UNDP and World Bank.

Balit S., Listening and Learning: Measuring the Impact of Communication for Development, An Online Forum. 2006, World Bank and DFID.

Panos, London. 2007, At the Heart of Change – The role of communication in sustainable development. Panos London.

Ramirez R. and Quarry W., Communication for another Development. Listening before telling 2009. Zed Books, London.

Gumucio Dagron A., (2007) Playing with fire: Participatory Communication. CMS Symbols Conference, Hyderabad, India.

Waisbord Silvio, (2008) The institutional challenges of participatory communication in international aid. Social Identities, Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture, Routledge Publisher, London.

SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2010-04-25

