

From ‘Hopeless Continent’ to ‘Africa Rising’: emerging discourses, opportunities and challenges for development communication

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How can development communicators position their work in response to new and emerging discourses, and how can they ensure that marginalised voices are heard and impact on decision-making at different levels? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of communication practice today? How can communication be better evaluated?

‘Hopeless Continent’...

In 1990 Africa was very much objectified as the world’s basket case, its territories and people objectified as “needing to be helped” – either because it was simply the ‘right’ thing to do, or out of self-interest. The media landscape was dominated by the mainstream international news media, with Africa’s story being told primarily by foreign correspondents that would parachute in as conflicts erupted.

The news window for African stories was limited, and the stories of choice highlighted famine, disaster, powerlessness, displaced populations on the move, and despots preying on human blood. There was little appetite for hopeful, inspiring stories – there was not enough space, and hope was not what news consumers were expected to consume. Bob Geldof’s 1985 globally televised *LiveAid* concert to raise awareness about the Ethiopian famine helped fuel this type of coverage, and development and humanitarian agencies soon figured out that to get support they needed to ‘brand’ that media space with stories about their work – ideally, using real people to convey suffering and elicit pity.

For most, the digital age had not yet begun. A few of us started filing stories using laptops and modems with acoustic couplers, but the majority of African journalists had no access to computers or the Internet, and worked in highly constrained environments with limited opportunities to build their capacities. This was still the age of the telex machine, fixed telephone line and analogue recording device.

At the time, UNICEF and FAO were among the few UN system agencies that recruited programme communication or C4D specialists. Everyone else was a media officer whose job was to promote the work of their agency. Budgets were dedicated to flying Western journalists in and out of refugee camps and famine zones, so they could alert the world to disasters-in-the-making and stimulate humanitarian donorship. The focus was on the news event, much less on the process and outcome of remedial development interventions.

Those UN agencies (such as UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO) that saw the value of C4D and alternative media paid for coverage of development issues as a public good. This was the heyday of agencies such as Inter Press Service, Panos, and others that pushed the frontiers of

participatory communication and sought to present alternative, more bottom-up and process-oriented coverage of Africa and elsewhere in the Global South.

Private philanthropic foundations that could take more risks than bilateral donors endowed initiatives such as the Communication for Social Change Consortium, which originally sought to revolutionise the theory and practice of C4D.

A decade of global UN conferences set new norms and standards, notably around human rights and the environment – the Rio Earth Summit 1992, the Vienna World Human Rights Conference 1993, the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development 1994, the 4th World Conference on Women Beijing 1995, and the Millennium Summit 2000, right up to the advent of the MDGs.

On the political front, the end of the Cold War sparked a flurry of transitions to multiparty democracy starting around 1990, which marked the end of ideological civil wars, but unleashed growing contestation and led to the eruption of new civil conflicts.

In 2000 The Economist published a cover story titled '*The Hopeless Continent*', showing an African combatant wielding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. The story reprised '*The Coming Anarchy*', Robert D. Kaplan's 1994 article in The Atlantic Monthly, which painted an apocalyptic picture of scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism and disease as signalling the end of days. The gratuitous portrayal by the Western media of drug-crazed child soldiers and cross-dressers, and merciless insurgents amputating limbs in Liberia and Sierra Leone, seemed to reinforce these views of Africa as the world's heart of darkness.

'Africa Rising'

By the dawn of the new century, the narrative had evolved from one of a 'hopeless continent' to one of a buoyant, rising Africa replete with opportunities for investors and populated by a burgeoning middle class bound to become model consumers and fuel economic growth.

After a 'lost decade' of stagnation and crisis in the 1990s, African economies started to grow steadily, by an average of 5% from 2000 onwards – buoyed by stronger governance, more prudent economic stewardship, and consistently high prices for commodities.

This shift was reflected in 'Africa Rising', the title of the Economist's 2013 cover story on the formerly hopeless continent. The title reflected the progress registered by many countries, but also served a reminder of the ease with which 'Africa' can be condemned and rehabilitated in a single editorial manoeuvre.

The communication landscape itself had evolved rapidly. Digital convergence forced the mainstream media to develop new business models or go out of business, and we saw the demise of monoliths such as United Press International. Spending on Africa coverage shrunk as the age of foreign correspondents and expensive bureaux gave way to hybrid, low-cost and higher-tech models of newsgathering.

The new millennium also saw the decline of 'alternative' communication NGOs, as UN and other agencies realised they could reach their priority audiences directly, on time and with

specific content. Agencies such as Panos London, which had benefitted from sizeable program partnership agreements with DFID, for example, were let go and had to close.

Although awareness of the need to engage with communities and build participatory approaches remained high, UNICEF invested more and more in digital strategic communication and advocacy, and somewhat less in C4D. While C4D remained a valuable component of the development toolkit, few UN agencies were able to devote the needed resources to it, and few had the appetite for approaches that did not yield results that could be instantly communicable to external audiences.

Within Africa, there was a growing emphasis on generating locally relevant content, produced by local journalists -some professional, others self-motivated scribes and bloggers. The democratisation of access to the Internet and ICTs, coupled with the opening up of political space, enabled African citizens to access increasingly diverse content, as well as to communicate more easily. This changed scenario posed both challenges and opportunities to the development industry.

Aid-centred discourses around ‘conditionality’ began to give way to talk about ‘African ownership’, ‘mutual accountability’, ‘governance’, ‘domestic resources for development’, etc. Aid levels continued to rise until 2010, when the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis affected expenditure, but rebounded again in 2013 to reach their highest-ever level (US\$ 134.8 billion) despite continued pressure on global economy. The aid architecture has also evolved and fragmented, as manifested by the rise of China and the other BRICS.

Africa’s economic growth picked up pace – but much of the value from extractives and commodities windfalls exports continued to be expropriated through illegal manoeuvres such as transfer mispricing and tax evasion. Africa loses an estimated US\$ 50 billion in illicit financial flows each year (ECA 2015), which is double the amount that flows into Africa in the form of aid. Multinational corporations are responsible for 60% of these IFFs out of Africa, with poor domestic governance and corruption playing a big part.

Overall, Africa is upbeat – there’s visible investment in infrastructure, a growing middle class, a generation of connected young people who can leapfrog – smartphones, Mobile Internet, youth bulge, digital TV, Silicon Savannah, and so on. The continent has gone from ‘hopeless’ to ‘rising’ in little more than a decade.

Some of the MDGs have been partially met and others not, as the transition to the SDGs proceeds apace in 2015. There are old and new challenges and threats to deal with – Ebola, Polio, Malaria, child exploitation, poor delivery of basic services, a learning crisis in education, lack of access to water, the appeal of jihadism and democratic backsliding, to name but a few.

For communicators, the difference between now and then is that communicating suffering is no longer a guarantee that we can get help to those who need it and change the world. The horror of migrants drowning in search of a better life in Europe, and the cynicism with which EU nations are responding to the on-going tragedy, reminds us of how inured the world has become to the suffering of others, as inequality continues to divide the world into haves and have-nots.

Now, more than ever, there is a need to push the boundaries, to find new ways to communicate *about* development, to represent Africa in all its complexity and contradiction, in ways that will unleash internal responses and capacities as well as elicit external support. But there is also need to communicate *for* development, to harness C4D to help solve problems, to help build capacity that sticks, to empower those on whose behalf communication specialists have so often sought to speak so that they can speak and act for themselves (da Costa, 2009).

UNICEF, strategic communications and C4D

UNICEF has always been considered a market leader in the UN system, in advocacy, strategic communication as well as C4D.

In the 1990s C4D was actively practised to help harness behaviour change amidst high levels of Maternal & Child Mortality, HIV & AIDS, Polio, etc. At the same time, there was increasing pressure for UNICEF to be more visible externally – to its financial backers and supporters.

As competition grew for resources, UNICEF joined other agencies in investing in strategic communication, especially targeted at Western citizens – tugging at heartstrings using powerful visual communications. The agency also became adept at global advocacy, targeting messages at decision-makers in the global conferences, at the UN, and to opinion shapers everywhere. UNICEF pioneered working with goodwill ambassadors and achieved massive and unprecedented visibility as exemplified by its partnership with FC Barcelona – a success story others are struggling to replicate.

Amidst this phenomenon, and with the growing refrain for ‘results, results and more results’, the relevance of C4D has waxed and waned in different administrations. Advocates have found it challenging to keep C4D on the map as it is not designed to deliver ‘quick wins’.

The advent of new and social media provides new avenues for digital storytelling and multiple channels for conveying messages in much more targeted ways – even as it becomes more and more difficult to retain the attention of fickle global citizens amidst aggressive competition for ‘eyeballs’ and short attention spans. Today we can track and measure social media influence, reach, impact; but what does all that information add up to?

Will smart engagement with social and new media be enough for UNICEF to ramp up its engagement with policy, politics and power? What other strategies, tools and tactics are needed to exploit sub-national, national, trans-national, regional, continental, and global spaces where change can be informed and influenced? Is it still about achieving visibility and occupying media space or are there also opportunities to develop a communication theory of change that sees communicators saving lives, helping solve existential threats, and working to build local capacities that will stick?

Opportunities and challenges

There are many opportunities for agencies such as UNICEF, and for each opportunity there is at least one challenge.

1. There is finally agreement that development is complex, dynamic, indeterminate, and often messy. At the same time, there is a growing – some would argue obsessive – focus on results, which is challenging the way we look at success in development.

The opportunity is to be able to better track, monitor and learn from what is working and what is not in development thanks to the many creative ways of theorising and describing social change, the plurality of methods of inquiry, the new techniques and metrics for measuring progress, and the different ways of communicating results now available.

The challenge materializes in the form of an enduring question: How do we reconcile the demand for ‘results now’ with the realisation that success is by no means always instant or even guaranteed; and that we cannot always claim credit for everything good that happens?

2. There is consensus that development actors need to engage with power around big issues such as extractives, agriculture, climate change, urbanisation, women’s economic empowerment, and devolution.

The opportunity is that communicators can calibrate their strategies of influence in a much more targeted way, to greater effect, and in ways that are more measurable. They can also leverage work that others are doing in different spaces and scales. For example, with devolution and decentralisation in many African countries, a new infrastructure is being rolled out that enables development agencies to work more closely with communities in need.

The challenge is that communicators need to understand the landscape better and be better capacitated to exploit the opportunities. There are many more advocacy and communication targets than ever before, so prioritising whom to engage is key.

3. The state is firmly back in. Development cannot happen sustainably without working through government systems. But there is also a need to inform and influence policy and practice below and above the state – sub-regionally at the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), continentally at the African Union (AU), and in global forums such as the G20, BRICs, G77, UN, etc.

The opportunity is the many different points of pressure that can be exploited to influence the way that development is legislated and happens. Engagement is possible with government officials, parliamentary committees, local government bodies, potential champions in the RECs, and at continental level, in the spaces created by the AUC, UNECA and the AfDB.

The challenge is knowing when to focus at what level, and how to forge strategic partnerships with allies – in a resource-scarce environment – to achieve the desired results.

4. New philanthropies are on the rise, including ambitious players such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, coupled with an increase in corporate giving, and the emergence of African philanthropy (Dangote, Elumelu, etc).

The opportunity is that UNICEF and its sister agencies can draw on a more diverse pool of funding to sustain and grow their work. Many of the corporate foundations work in specific

locations and on particular issues, and there are opportunities to influence where and how they spend their money so that there is greater alignment and impact. With smart partnership communication, the agencies can have huge impact in this area.

The challenge is whether a UN agency is optimally configured to engage with these new philanthropies. Amidst so many emergencies and with limited staffing, how much time can these agencies devote to this new space as it opens up?

5. Shift from one-dimensional, vertical media and communication systems to multidimensional network-based communication.

Development agencies, including bilateral funders, have the opportunity to target messages and pursue more interactive engagement with specific communities, do multi-stakeholder engagement, at reduced transaction cost. There are opportunities to do targeted ‘multicasting’ as opposed to broad scattergun ‘broadcasting’.

The main challenge is again one of capacity. How much can be done amidst so many priorities? Another challenge is incentives. What are these agencies more inclined to focus on and deliver – as it relates to what they consider most important for their survival and impact? As an example, does UNICEF get more funding and visibility from peddling images of suffering children, or from C4D work which is less visible?

6. Media gatekeepers and governments no longer have a monopoly on how the lives of ordinary Africans are portrayed or on the extent to which they can communicate – there are many channels and ways for perspectives to be shared, and more people can access these directly.

The opportunity is for a greater plurality in the voices that can be heard. More subaltern groups can be more active in shaping and influencing their futures. New models and approaches can be developed to stimulate behaviour and social change. Participation can be made real.

The challenge is how to engage with and hold the attention of all these new stakeholders. The landscape may be dynamic and exciting, but it is characterised by overload: too much content, and a cacophony of voices. The focus on greater inclusion and participation is underpinned by naïve assumptions that citizens will act to change their behaviour if only they receive and internalize information – when in reality knowledge is only one of many factors that determines whether and how people act. Is there appetite within these agencies for a ‘political economy’ approach to C4D? Can agencies realistically be expected to move away from instrumentalising the marginalised and ‘canning’ their participation to unlock funding?

What have we learned?

There are lessons that agency communicators, whether focused on strategic communications or on C4D, should consider:

There are many creative ways to work with ‘influentials’ to create policy space and open doors and windows.

- The [Africa Progress Panel \(APP\) Secretariat](#) generates high-quality flagship reports on key issues, and boils down the key messages from each report to develop communication materials that former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and his fellow Panelists (Graca Machel, Strive Masiyiwa, Tidjiane Thiam, Bob Geldof, Robert Rubin, Linah Mohohlo and Peter Eigen) use to advance specific recommendations or calls to action, targeting African leaders and senior policymakers as well as the international community.
- What we have learned, though, is that it is not enough to be quoted in the FT or Wall Street Journal or Washington Post – we need to do more to work in the policy spaces opened up by the Panel, by seeking out and engaging policy and other influential actors... in different geo-political spaces. The key is to be able to make productive use of the space that is opened up: policy windows are open for a brief moment, and you have to capitalise on the opportunity.

Evaluation needs to move beyond external accounting to internal learning.

- All too often, evaluation is an exercise in accountancy, when it should be about downward accountability and learning (Mebrathu et al 2007).
- The ‘results’ orthodoxy has forced us all to think in terms of log-frames and upward accountability. While we argue that impact is about outcome and not output, we more often than not develop theories of change that present a simplistic view of social change, boiling everything down to cause and effect.
- Social change is anything but linear or stagist; it is complex, dynamic, multi-dimensional, emergent, messy and risky. We should not be afraid of failure, and we should be ready to learn from what does not work, as much as from success.
- There are no cookie-cutter lessons that can be applied universally – the factors that mediate social change are largely contextual, and understanding these factors does not necessarily mean they can be replicated instrumentally across the board. Understanding what drives social changes necessitates engaging with the political as well as the technical – a well-grounded ‘political economy’ approach to C4D is essential to designing relevant programmes that respond to realities on the ground, as well as to responding to what Enghel (2015) calls ‘neoliberal digital capitalism’.
- As Lennie & Tacchi (2013) point out, C4D approaches prioritise *engagement*, *relationships*, *empowerment* and *dialogue*, all of which need to be reflected in how we monitor, evaluate and learn from interventions. The process of evaluative research should be as valuable as the outcomes.

Amplifying and facilitating voice is often much harder than we think.

- The 2005 Paris Declaration marked a rhetorical paradigm shift from donor-driven development to recipient country-owned development. This shift partly recognises the critical importance of voice. In theory, subaltern actors, marginalised groups and others at the weak end of asymmetric power should now be full participants in all decision-making that relates to them. In practice, however, participation is contested and facilitating voice does not add up to a recalibrating of the global order.
- C4D offers many good ideas about how to give voice to the voiceless. But we need to do more to include a diversity of actors at every stage of every development intervention. It is much easier to claim participation than to really make it happen in practice. We need to continue to find ways to ensure that communities so often marginalised can speak for themselves and can influence different power and decision-making structures (as opposed to us speaking on their behalf).

Messaging has limited value unless it is strategic and allied to wider efforts to bring about change.

- The limited value of monologic (sender-to-receiver) communication has been well documented. More recently, communicators have begun to realise that focusing on supply alone reduces the likelihood of impact. This means that, while the content and crafting of the message remains important, it cannot happen without groundwork on the demand-side.
- Before deploying messages and seeking to engage, it's of critical importance to understand the policy targets – who they are, what incentives drive them to engage with evidence, how long their attention-spans are likely to be, who else in their sphere of influence should be reckoned with, etc.
- Achieving policy traction is science as well as art. Different strategies and tactics will need to be deployed to engage with different stakeholders and targets.

Sharing the applause is way better for your image than claiming sole credit for good deeds.

- Development institutions need to strike a balance between what they claim credit for, and what they engage in on the basis of multi-stakeholder ventures where successful outcomes are seen as the result of shared endeavour. We need to think differently about institutional branding. While it's partially true that in today's development industry one needs to be seen to be heard, there are ways to resolve the inherent tension between instant gratification and long-run impact.

Ultimately, development communicators cannot exist or operate in a vacuum. There is a live, complex, shifting, dynamic context that calls for more grounded theory, smarter strategic thinking, more effective application of lessons learned, and patience. My focus has been on the African context, but the lessons I have discussed may have resonance in other contexts, both developing and developed.

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