

A breath of fresh air

By Silvia Balit¹

Reading the first issues of *Glocal Times* back in 2005 was like a breath of fresh air, coming as I was from years of institutional communication within the UN system. I found articles submitted by colleagues and pioneers of communication for development, well known to me. But, more important were submissions by graduate students, representatives of NGOs and scholars from developed but also developing countries. A good mix from civil society, and the themes covered were timely but also original: You would never find in a UN publication a piece on “mediated and non mediated communication of Filipino au pairs in Denmark”. True to its mission, the publication is thought provoking and an original forum for ideas and issues related to communication for development and social change.

The context has changed considerably since 1969, when FAO first established its Development Support Communication Unit, thus establishing a new frontier. Little was known in those days about how to communicate with illiterate people in rural areas of developing countries, and there was insufficient recognition of the role of local culture and indigenous knowledge. As Colin Fraser, the head of the Unit, used to say, the work we did was like painting on an empty canvas. Top down approaches were prevalent, and development efforts were primarily devoted to transfer of technology. Communication was seen primarily as production of visual aids to support extension or understood as dealing with roads, telegraphs and telephones, as a confused project manager in Raqqa, Syria, once said to me. The Unit began working in the field, promoting participatory approaches and planning with the project beneficiaries, thus taking into account the perceptions of rural people and the realities of rural areas. Our partners were primarily government representatives and programs. The media applied were simple and appropriate to the social and economic conditions in rural areas in developing countries: rural radio, slide sets and filmstrips and portable video. But even the use of portable video was contested by many government representatives as being too sophisticated for *campesinos*. Slowly, the results of the creative programs implemented in the field were successful, and FAO became recognised as one of the leading agencies in communication for development. Most of the guiding principles and methodologies developed in those years are still valid today.

The widespread use of cell phones was inconceivable in those early years, and community radios, computers and social media were nonexistent. By now, the information revolution has provided communication practitioners with a wide spectrum of new technologies and media to increase the potential of sharing knowledge in rural areas and giving people a voice.

Adding to the technologies now available, the number of partners in the field of communication for development has increased. Today there are global networks such as the Communication Initiative and the Communication for Development Network that bring together representatives of civil society, NGOs, scholars and students to share knowledge and to debate issues. More and more regional and local platforms are being established to deal with local issues. There are more academic institutions that offer courses and degrees in communication for development. And judging from the vacancy announcements distributed

by the networks, there are more consultancies and posts available for communication practitioners.

The areas of application also have widened, including problems such as climate change, migration, scarcity of freshwater, natural resource management, and epidemics -AIDs first, and more recently Ebola. These new issues challenge communication practitioners because they require new approaches, practices and skills.

Yet, notwithstanding the experience gained and the results demonstrated in hundreds of community based programs, communication for development is still today marginalised in development. The Millennium Goals are an example of said marginalization. Communication strategies are not integrated from the start in development programs, and continue to be given too few resources. It was hoped that the World Congress on Communication for Development held in Rome in 2006 could be an important event in terms of institutionalizing communication for development, to advocate with policy makers. But instead no action followed, and its sponsors FAO and the World Bank actually downgraded their development communication programs in favour of corporate communication and public relations. Since 2006, only UNICEF strengthened its communication for development programmes.

Today, Communication for Development is in a transitional phase: on the one hand, there is no lack of appropriate technologies, and there are academic programs and networks, specialised communication for development networks, and multiple stakeholders. In addition to governments, partners include representatives of civil society, NGOs and rural communities. There are more results from scientific and participatory evaluations as an integral part of programs. There are new challenges with regard to subject matter.

However, at the institutional and government level the problems remain the same. There is still a lack of a correct understanding of what communication is all about. Most still favour corporate communication and publicity... Few will deny the importance of participation, but often it is theoretical and not always put into practice. Participatory processes go against bureaucratic procedures, project log frames, and results-based management, and take time. Moreover, because communication for development is political, especially when it deals with change and political and social injustices, the will to apply participatory communication approaches is often lacking, especially at the local level.

What can we expect in future years? Fortunately, the international donor community is looking for new approaches to overcome the failures of the last decades-fresh ideas and action on the part of development institutions, governments and local authorities. They are demanding that ownership, dialogue, participation and respect for indigenous knowledge become essential components of programs they are ready to finance. These are all approaches that communication for development has always applied as part of its methodologies when working with marginal and vulnerable communities, and therefore we can still hope that in the future there will be an enabling environment for communication to become an essential and integral component in development.

Communication practitioners will need to adapt to a changing world, learn new skills and apply innovative practices to address the challenges posed by new issues and multiple stakeholders. At the same time, they should not forget the successful methods and

experiences of the past that are still valid and can be merged with new approaches. In this context, as *Glocal Times* enters a new decade, it should continue to share knowledge and promote dialogue on innovative approaches and issues in communication for development and social change. It can become a focal point for academic networks and scholars. It can disseminate the results of innovative research and evaluations in the field. And not least, it can make an important contribution to the continuing need for advocacy with decision makers and donors.

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