



COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Winning the argument, but what about the practice?

James Deane



In this article, James Deane outlines how the Communication for Social Change Consortium (CFSC) is developing a network to address obstacles to more effective implementation of communication for social change programming, particularly increasing the capacity and expertise to implement effective programmes on the ground.

A lasting irony for those who work to promote communication for social change (CFSC) is how often we win the argument, and how rarely doing so translates to increased prioritisation by development and donor organisations on the ground. Unless we understand why this happens, we stand little chance of changing it.

There is plenty of evidence of participatory focused communication approaches winning the argument within development agencies. Two types of examples are worth putting forward. The first are where policy debates, often at high level, have concluded that CFSC is a clear component of an effective response to a particular problem; the second is when participatory communication approaches are being prioritised, but are then de-prioritised for reasons unconnected to their effectiveness (normally having to do with broader institutional reasons).

The best, perhaps most tragic example, of where communication for social change arguments have taken many years to be translated into practical on-the-ground action is the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Almost from the first analyses outlining the full implications of the potential scale of AIDS in the mid and late 1980s, a strong link was made between the spread of HIV and issues of poverty, marginalisation, discrimination and disempowerment. From the outset, HIV/AIDS was characterised as an epidemic driven by complex societal factors, and the response to it would need to reflect such factors. Such arguments were stressed particularly strongly in the mid and late 1980s both by the World Health Organization's Global Programme on AIDS under Dr Jonathan Mann, and by international agencies working on the issue [1].

NEW
GLOCAL TIMES
GLOBALA TIDER

ISSUE 3
February 2006

In contrast, the emphasis of the response to HIV/AIDS for the first decade and more was on a series of strategies heavily focused on targeting messages to encourage individuals to change their behaviour. These strategies were almost entirely divorced from the cultural, social and political contexts which constituted the reality of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Simple solutions were sought for complex problems, and this, combined with the appallingly slow realisation by the international community of the huge scale of the HIV/AIDS threat, meant that more than a decade was largely lost in the response to the crisis.

CFSC arguments have been repeatedly stressed in strategic appraisals of HIV communication programming. In 1999, UNAIDS published a major assessment of communication programming in response to HIV/AIDS [2], which critiqued earlier programmes and proposed more participatory and socially rooted communication programming; there was very little change in practice. In 2001, a UN Communication for Development Roundtable urged a change in direction, and in 2005, the UK Department for International Development published new guidelines on AIDS Communication which strongly echoed the UNAIDS and other similar reports and marked a significant shift away from traditional behaviour change approaches to HIV/AIDS. All these are examples of considered examination of the record of the past and the product of substantial consultation with affected communities. In each case, the communication for social change/participatory communication rooted arguments have been favoured.

However, real change in HIV/AIDS communication practice began to come about when civil society organisations and activists in developing countries, supported by civil society in the North, became sufficiently organised and influential to shape HIV/AIDS agendas. Even today much of the HIV/AIDS response is insufficiently rooted in agendas shaped by those most affected by the epidemic, and increasing resources are invested in ABC programming (abstinence, being faithful and using a condom) which are criticised for oversimplified approaches.

Throughout the history of the AIDS pandemic, there have been numerous strategic conversations about what communication strategies are most appropriate in the response to HIV/AIDS, frequent conclusions that the response needs to be more rooted in the social and cultural realities that characterise the spread of HIV, and during this time, much of the funded response to HIV/AIDS has tended to latch onto relatively simple, easy to support and relatively short term interventions.

There are many other examples in other sectors and indeed much of the development story of the last twenty years can be characterised as an

increasingly strong rhetoric and strategic dialogue on concepts of participation, voice and inclusion, which is rarely matched with the application of those principles in practical development programming.

Even when strong and effective communication for development programming is established within organisations, it has proven remarkably vulnerable to organisations deciding to reprioritise and downgrade departments implementing such programmes. The Food and Agricultural Organization was a pioneer in the field in the 1970s and 1980s, before a strategic reorganisation downgraded the division. Similar events have smitten other organisations, both multilateral and bilateral.

There are many reasons for this. Often “communication for development” or “information and communication for development” programming has become conflated with public relations and strategic communication. If communication for development and communication for social change programming is housed in the same organisational unit as external communications, it generally suffers from confusion and a lack of prioritisation. Senior managers and directors of organisations generally prefer the importance of getting their own institutional message across to the more complex business of empowering people living in poverty through communication.

Sometimes, communication for development programmes have been disbanded as organisations have “mainstreamed” the function, often with little strategic attention being paid to internal advocacy and prioritisation of the field.

This is a long running challenge, but there is much to suggest that, while arguments continue to be won, the institutional impediments to concerted implementation of good communication for development programming are becoming more, not less severe.

The current development landscape stresses on concepts of ownership, accountability and voice. There is a growing understanding that new communication technologies and increasingly complex communication environments have profound implications for how people living in poverty access information, discuss and create spaces for dialogue within their communities, make their own meanings from information, and communicate their own perspectives on issues that affect them.

Despite this, international development agencies are arguably less equipped and ready to support this area than they have ever been. The reasons for this are complex and multidimensional, but in addition to those mentioned already, they include:

- Most bilateral, and many multilateral donors, have undergone rapid decentralisation processes. Decisions on funding are made at the country level on the assumption that decision-making needs to be as close to the problem as possible. This is clearly sensible, but for a sector like communication for development and social change, with little existing institutional support, commitment ends up depending on the individual interests of programme officers in donor country desks. Allied to this is rapid staff turnover within development agencies. Communication trends are shifting rapidly, and effective policies require close and sustained attention and commitment. Current institutional environments do not favour such commitment.
- Donors are channelling increasing funds through governments in the form of budget support and sector wide approaches (SWAPs). This invests greater control and responsibility in the hands of the government, and less in the donor organisation, and is a key component of strategies designed to ensure that governments become more accountable to their own citizens than to donors. However, support for communication for social change related programming is more difficult to implement in this way, particularly if it is part of efforts designed to strengthen citizen participation to help hold governments accountable.
- While most donors work in the name of international cooperation, many of their donor policies are actively designed to foster competition between like-minded organisations. Particularly in the media and communication sphere, where co-operation among agencies for a collective and more coherent agenda and set of strategies is badly needed, many donor policies ensure that those organisations working in this arena are forced to compete with each other, sometimes unnecessarily.
- Donors have increasingly moved to evaluation mechanisms focused on systems such as results-based management. These have tended to insist that quantitative indicators within short time frames are used to assess impact. Many communication for development initiatives, particularly those aimed at empowering people living in poverty, take time to show results, and the results – while often compelling – are less amenable to quantitative evaluation. There is a major new focus on participatory monitoring and evaluation methodologies, but these are yet to achieve mainstream and routine acceptance in many organisations.
- Development agendas are notorious for going through fads and fashions. Even when donors commit themselves to a support policy in an area like media, interest is often lost as some new crisis or issue emerges. Donors are in general becoming more strategic and coherent in their development assistance but, as mentioned already, support for communication related programming has been particularly prone to a lack of strategic thinking,

engagement and follow through.

- The funding process itself can be difficult. Communication for development and communication for social change organisations seek (or at least should seek) to develop strategies according to the stated needs and assessments of their partners, stakeholders, boards and above all those they are aiming to support. They then need to find ways of articulating these strategic priorities so that they resonate with the sometimes very different strategic priorities of donor organisations. Donors in turn need to set priorities for funding, and therefore have to develop their own strategic priorities and find those best suited to implement them. Few communication for development organisations see themselves mainly as implementers of donor funding, but donors are often forced to see them as such. Such a dynamic can cause frustration and incoherence.
- Donor organisations can find this field of communication support contentious and difficult. Working to empower and provide a voice to those living in poverty can be a sensitive and political element of development.
- Finally and most obviously, the value and importance of communication in underpinning other development strategies remains largely unrecognised and consequently the status of this field is marginal within most development agencies.

All these are major challenges facing communication for development and communication for social change organisations. All of them require consistent and intensive advocacy over a long period of time to change.

What then can be done? Moving communication for social change to the centre of development thinking and practice will require four key interventions:

1. Consistent advocacy to overcome all the hurdles outlined above. This requires extensive and intensive work and discussions with a whole range of development agencies.
2. Demonstrating a stronger evidence base for the impact of communication for social change. This is a precondition, but not necessarily a guarantee for greater development priority being attached to CFSC programming. Few development organisations shift policy according to evidence alone, particularly when that evidence poses substantial organisational and cultural challenges to accepted ways of working. Political (internal and external) and other factors often play as big a part in determining

priorities. Nevertheless, the communication for development field in general, and communication for social change in particular, is unlikely to progress to the extent needed without better evidence and better presentation and consolidation of the extensive evidence that exists already.

3. Thinking and theoretical credibility: The field will also need a greater credibility and evidence of the strength of the theoretical foundations on which it is built.
4. The capacity to transform theory and principles into effective practice.

The Communication for Social Change Consortium is heavily involved in building each of these areas.

It is involved in *advocacy* with and providing detailed technical advice to many bilateral and multilateral agencies, including providing formal strategic advice to several agencies as they develop communication strategies focused on empowering people living in poverty.

It is working to develop more effective *good practice in participatory monitoring and evaluation methodologies* [3], as well as planning a major mapping study (with other partners) to collect and collate evidence of *impact* of communication for development and communication for social change initiatives.

It has developed a *body of knowledge* available at the Consortium website (www.communicationforsocialchange.org) consolidating the best thinking and writing on communication for social change issues, and is shortly to produce a major anthology of the best articles and papers in this field in a single publication, including many (especially from Latin America) which have never before been published in English. The theoretical foundations of communication for social change, always strong, are increasingly being shown to be far more deep rooted, deep seated and long lasting than is generally acknowledged. This is being complemented by an increasingly organised network of universities and learning institutions focused on communication for development and participatory communication, also facilitated by the Consortium. Add to this the immense body of practice of communication for development and communication for social change, revealed through sites such as the Communication Initiative (www.comminit.com), and the landscape of this field becomes an increasingly full and rich one with fresh potential and new opportunities.

Even with all these elements, however, communication for social change will continue to struggle to become a mainstream component of

development programming unless development agencies become more convinced that the principles, thinking and community of practice can be translated into a series of practical, implementable set of strategies. The formidable difficulties of implementing CFSC strategies in the context of large, often technocratic and bureaucratic organisations have already been detailed above. At the same time, however, development agencies are increasingly recognising that current communication strategies are not sufficiently appropriate to the development challenges they face, or the increasingly complex communication environments which currently exist in most countries.

For this reason, the Consortium is facilitating a network of practitioners internationally who can advise development organisations on the development of effective, practical communication for social change strategies, while remaining faithful to the principles and processes that underpin this field. The first meeting of the *Communication for Social Change Practitioner Network* took place at the College of Development Communication at the University of Los Baños in the Philippines in September 2005. The network is designed to be a semi-formal grouping of individuals committed to and expert in communication for social change who can offer advice and support to organisations seeking to transform principle and theory into practice.

The Practitioner Network gathered at Los Baños agreed to:

- develop a strategy to provide mutual training and technical support to those in the network in order to attain a common level of CFSC proficiency;
- identify and develop training and technical needs and materials for development agencies interested in using communication for social change principles;
- make the expertise and knowledge of this network available to international agencies planning to develop communication for social change strategies.
- explore an accreditation standard for communication for social change practitioners.

The accreditation standard for communication for social change in particular was intensively discussed. Participants, as well as the Consortium, are taking steps to ensure that such an accreditation standard does not risk becoming an attempt to regulate all action in this area, but rather that provides a series of strong pillars in support of communication for social change practice. In particular, that it:

- contributes to developing the seriousness and credibility of CFSC practice;
- distinguishes communication for social change skill sets from those of other communication approaches (social marketing, strategic communication etc.);
- creates a stronger level of commitment to the participatory and process focused principles underpinning communication for social change practice;
- encourages and provides incentives and status to working in this field;
- provides people working in this field with a qualification/standard that agencies and partners can trust and value;
- and develops and maintains a high professional standard to this work.

The final and detailed criteria for this accreditation standard have yet to be published, but they include a demonstrated and sustained focus on programming consistent with, and reflecting, a communication for social change approach; and an expressed commitment to the CFSC values and principles (both in work and words).

Practitioners in this field have a demanding task. Communication for social change is process oriented, starts from where people are and not where the implementing organisation wants them to be, is long term in scope, and involves a strong focus on dialogue centred communication strategies. Such principles can quickly find themselves in tension with organisations wishing to see quantitative results in short time horizons. Despite this, the experience of the Consortium has been that many agencies increasingly understand that short term programming is the enemy of long term impact, and that the realities of modern communication environments require a different approach.

This is a curious moment in communication for development related debates. The arguments for investing in communication strategies that provide a voice to people living in poverty rather than seek to tell them what to think or do; that empower people rather than simply inform them; that take advantage of all that is best in the rapid, dynamic and contradictory elements of the information revolutions currently evolving in most developing countries, and understand and ameliorate all that is worse –these arguments have never been stronger, and their relevance to current development challenges have never been greater.

Despite this, understanding and support for this field within the development community remains sparse, fragmented, inconsistent and fragile. Arguments still need to be won. A combination of advocacy, evidence gathering, investment in the theoretical underpinnings of the

field, and the provision of the capacity to implement and translate theory into practical action are required. Much remains to be done in each of these spheres.

* James Deane is managing director of the Communication for Social Change Consortium (CFSC) and a founder and former director of the Panos Institute, London. He was the organizer of the UN Communication for Development Roundtable in 2001 and the Global Media Forum at the Global Knowledge conference in Malaysia in 2000, and the convener of the Bellagio Symposiums on Media, Freedom and Poverty and on Communication and the Millennium Development Goals (both in 2004). He has provided formal strategic advice and consultancies to Dfid, Danida, Sida, the World Bank, WHO, Unicef, Unesco, UNDP, UNFPA, FAO. He has been a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and has a Masters degree in international communication and development.

jdeane@communicationforsocialchange.org

[1] AIDS and the Third World, Panos Institute, 1986, 1987, 1988; Blaming Others: Race and worldwide AIDS, 1988, Panos Institute.

[2] Communication Framework for HIV/AIDS: a new direction, UNAIDS/Penn State University, 1999.

[3] Parks, Will with Denise Gray-Felder, Jim Hunt and Ailish Byrne (2005) Who measures change? An introduction to participatory monitoring and evaluation of communication for social change, Communication for Social Change Consortium (www.communicationforsocialchange.org).

SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2006-01-25



© GLOCAL TIMES 2005
FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM
ISSN 1654-7985