

Promoting communication in agricultural and rural development: FAO's priorities and initiatives in 2014

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ComDev within the FAO strategic framework

We are less than one year away from the 2015 target date for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and there are still 842 million people suffering from hunger and malnutrition, three quarters of whom live in rural areas. Considering that 76 per cent of the global rural population has agriculture as the main source of livelihood, supporting agricultural development is crucial for eradicating hunger and extreme poverty especially in developing countries².

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has embraced the MDG process by assisting its members in their efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. FAO's vision moves forward "a world free of hunger and malnutrition where food and agriculture contributes to improving the living standards of all, especially the poorest, in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner" (FAO, 2013) In 2012 FAO adopted a new Strategic Framework to better respond to its mandate and to the needs identified by the member countries, prioritizing five Strategic Objectives (SOs):

- Contribute to the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition;
- Increase and improve the provision of goods and services from agriculture, forestry and fisheries in a sustainable manner;
- Reduce rural poverty;
- Enable more inclusive and efficient agricultural and food systems at the local, national and international levels; and
- Increase the resilience of livelihoods to threats and crisis.

The new FAO Strategic Framework requires the adoption of people-centered communication approaches to ensure dialogue, concerted action and policy change, especially at the field level. Communication for Development (ComDev)³ is a communication approach used by FAO that is based on the integrated use of participatory methods and media –from traditional media to ICTs– in order to maximize impacts, cost-effectiveness and the sustainability of agricultural and rural development initiatives. ComDev activities facilitate improved access to information, knowledge sharing, participatory decision-making and multi-stakeholders engagement in the rural sector.

Notwithstanding the institutional transformational changes occurred within FAO in the last years, the focus of its ComDev Team remains on empowering rural stakeholders, promoting policy frameworks and strengthening institutional capacities, as well as on the provision of efficient rural communication services. FAO has over 40 years of experience in developing ComDev projects and components in different regions, recently synthesized in a comprehensive publication, the "Communication for Rural Development Sourcebook" (FAO, 2014). This Sourcebook provides a series of operational criteria that may inspire ComDev

practitioners working in the field of agriculture and rural development (FAO 2014a: 209), such as:

- Understand the local context
- Assess people's knowledge, perspectives and expectations
- Build on existing communication systems
- Ensure equitable access to knowledge and information
- Promote local content
- Use appropriate communication technologies
- Enhance local capacities
- Facilitate constructive environments
- Strengthen rural communication services and knowledge institutions
- Foster dialogue and mediation



Bolivia: Participatory assessment of communication needs in agriculture ©FAO/ICDS Bolivia.

Advancing FAO priorities through ComDev

ComDev has been a component of FAO's work since 1969. Despite the frequent institutional changes suffered by the Organization in the last decades and the increasing reduction of the staff assigned to the Team, ComDev has been maintained as an area of work that evolved through different phases up to the present: a first phase (1969-1993) in which ComDev was a full-fledged service, and communication and participatory approaches were widely used to support agriculture development projects; a second phase (1994-2006) when a ComDev Unit was established as part of the Sustainable Development Department, with a strong focus on community based approaches and natural resources management; and a third phase (2007-2012) in which the ComDev Team merged with the agricultural Research and Extension group, with extensive efforts directed towards the application of ComDev in the field of agricultural innovation.

As of January 2013, the ComDev Team has been relocated within the newly established Office for Partnerships, Advocacy and Capacity Development, more specifically within the Advocacy Unit. The present phase coincides with a renewed recognition of ComDev as a standing discipline and a key area of work with the overall goal to *enable rural people's access to relevant information and foster social dialogue and mobilization to achieve FAO strategic objectives*.

To meet this goal, present ComDev activities concentrate on three major lines of action:

- Support FAO Strategic Objectives and Country Program Frameworks in the design and implementation of ComDev strategies;
- Advocate communication in order to promote access to information, and social dialogue and mobilization on key issues related to FAO's mandate (e.g. family farming, hunger and malnutrition, the right to food, gender equality, and responsible land tenure); and
- Strengthen the ComDev capacity of rural institutions, FAO programs and decentralized offices, as well as of relevant partners.

These objectives can be achieved through ComDev actions such as e.g. raising awareness on compelling agricultural and rural development topics; using appropriate communication methods and media to reach specific audiences; and opening up venues for multi-stakeholder dialogue and participation in policy-making and program development. Within this framework, the 2014 program of work of the ComDev Team foresees a series of relevant activities and events that will help accomplishing the priorities identified. Those activities, presented in more detail in the following section of this article, include:

- The *Communication and Community Media Action to advance family farming* initiative, which started in June 2013 and is planned to last until December 2014. It is promoted jointly with the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) Secretariat and its regional offices in Latin America, Asia and Africa;
- The *XIII UN Round Table on ComDev* that will be organized by FAO in its Rome headquarters in September 2014; and
- A workshop that will be held in India in July as part of the yearly international conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).

Communication and Community Media Action for family farming: a FAO-AMARC initiative

Family farmers are those whose rural activities are managed and operated by a family and rely predominantly on family labor. There are an estimated 1.5 billion people, almost 500 million families worldwide, involved in family farming. In order to recognize and celebrate the importance of family farming for alleviating poverty and improving global food security, the UN proclaimed 2014 as the International Year of Family Farming (IYFF). The IYFF “aims to raise the profile of family farming and smallholder farming by focusing world attention on its significant role in eradicating hunger and poverty, providing food security and nutrition, improving livelihoods, managing natural resources, protecting the environment, and achieving sustainable development, in particular in rural areas”⁴. It will also provide an opportunity to position family farming at the center of the policy agenda as a viable model of sustainable agriculture suitable for improving global food security.

In line with the IYFF, FAO is promoting regional dialogues, thematic conference and online discussions worldwide in collaboration with member countries, development organizations, social movements and farmers associations, in order to raise awareness of the challenges faced by family farmers and promote policies to support them, improving cooperation in this field at different levels.

In the context of a long-standing partnership, FAO and AMARC agreed to join efforts to highlight the IYFF through the initiative “Communication and Community Media Action to advance family farming”, established to acknowledge the role that ComDev can play in improving family farmers’ access to relevant information, getting organized and making their voices heard in policy processes. As part of this initiative, awareness campaigns at regional and global level have been launched through AMARC’s community radio networks worldwide³. The campaigns’ main objectives are to raise awareness of smallholders and family farmers on the IYFF and to promote their involvement in policy dialogue. The campaigns respond to the need to have family farmers at the center of “their” year, and to promote awareness of the crucial role that they are playing in feeding the world.

Another key component of the FAO-AMARC joint initiative is the organization of an *International Forum on Communication and Community Media for Family Farming* (IFCCM) that will take place in Rome in October 2014. The main objectives of the Forum are to share lessons and innovative ComDev practices, advocate for ComDev and community media’s role, and stimulate discussion on rural communication services. The IFCCM will bring together representatives of rural development agencies, research institutes, community media, civil society and farmer organizations, as well as governments, donors and private sector actors, to discuss the role of ComDev as a driver for innovation, social change and farmers’ participation in agricultural and rural development policy. Additionally, the IFCCM will showcase needs and opportunities for new rural communication services and partnerships with a particular focus on women and youth in family farming, and propose an agenda for follow-up.



Family farmers listening to a community radio programme in Guinea (2012) ©FAO/A. Proto

In preparation for the IFCCM, a background study on the role of communication in family farming and series of regional virtual consultations is being launched in collaboration with AMARC’s Secretariat, regional offices, and the AMARC-FAO joint platforms in Asia ([ComDev Asia](#)), Africa ([Yenkasa](#)) and Latin America ([Onda Rural](#)). The objective is to gather inputs and advocate for ComDev policies in support of family farming among a wide number of stakeholders, including civil society organizations, community media and the private sector. The results of the IFCCM will be presented at the Global Dialogue on Family Farming to steer collaboration among partners interested in promoting communication policies and services and to provide specialized advice, research and training in ComDev.

XIII UN Round Table on Communication for Development

Communication for Development is well established in several agencies within the UN system. The mandate, core activities, institutional positioning and level of funding of ComDev within each UN agency vary widely according to the mandate and priorities of each organization (e.g. health, childhood, agriculture, gender issues, HIV prevention, environment, etc.). However, there are a few common features of the ComDev approach that are considered essential to support development initiatives, such as: the participatory and inclusive focus associated with ComDev; the capacity to build linkages and to increase knowledge and awareness; the relevance given to enhancing community and government human resource capacities in ComDev in order to foster behavioral and social change, and to promote self-esteem and self-reliance within and among communities (FAO, 2014c).

The United Nations Inter-Agency Round Table (UNRT) on ComDev, first introduced in 1986, currently reports to the UN General Assembly. It was originally conceived as a forum for exchanging ideas and experiences in the area of ComDev, and in order to strengthen collaboration between agencies in this field. The Round Tables are organized every two years on a rotating basis, and hosted by different UN agencies and participating organizations. FAO has been one of the main founding members and promoters and, with UNESCO as the official coordinator, organized two UNRTs in 1991 and 2004. The FAO ComDev team acts as the focal point of the Organization for the UNRT.

The UNRT remains the main vehicle for advocating the added value of ComDev across the UN system and promoting coordination in this field among the different agencies. In 1995 and 1996, the UN General Assembly asked the UN Secretary-General, in consultation with the UNESCO Director-General, to submit biennial reports on the UNRT's implementation. This request shows the Round Table's relevance and recognition within the UN system. The format, themes and venue of each Round Table are decided by the host organization with the concurrence of a Steering Committee. The themes usually focus on the specific technical area of the host organization, but with a broad outlook, in order to allow all participating agencies to contribute conceptually to the discussions within their particular technical mandates.

This year, FAO will organize the XIII UNRT from 15 to 17 September. Under the title "Mainstreaming Communication for Development in Policies and Programs/Enabling social inclusion to support food security, resilient livelihoods and Family Farming", the event will provide the venue for in-depth discussions on the role of ComDev in agricultural and rural development policies. An interagency Steering Committee composed by representatives of agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, WHO, ILO, WB, and UNFPA is working on the preparation of the contents and agenda.

FAO recognizes the need to strengthen and foster inter-agency collaboration in this field as a priority in order to maximize the impact of communication efforts in development programs and policies, particularly those aimed at promoting food and nutrition security, family farming and resilient rural livelihoods. For this reason, linkages as well as opportunities for collaboration in these areas among agencies' are being identified and will be discussed at the UNRT. Approximately 40 people, including ComDev specialists from UN agencies, NGOs, selected donors, and selected participants from member countries, projects and civil society organizations, will attend the three-day event, which will include plenary and group sessions, and an internal meeting of the core group of UN agencies.

IAMCR pre-conference “Communication for sustainable rural development and social change”

The International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) is a worldwide professional organization which aims to advance media and communication research throughout the world. This year, FAO will be contributing to a pre-conference in Hyderabad, India, on 14 July 2014 to be held prior to IAMCR’s annual conference that will take place from 15 to 19 July. The pre-conference focuses on the topic “Communication for sustainable rural development and social change” and will look into ComDev’s contribution to sustainability as well as to key development issues such as human rights, equity, peoples’ empowerment, and quality of life.

The one-day pre-conference will cover topics related to innovative methodologies, new ICTs, innovation system approaches, monitoring and evaluation, and communication research, with the participation of institutions and organizations with a solid tradition in applying ComDev to the rural sector, such as: Wageningen University (The Netherlands); Digital Green platform for rural development (India); the School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, University of Reading (United Kingdom); School of Environmental Design & Rural Development, University of Guelph (Canada); and the Department of Media and Communication, City University of Hong Kong.

At the pre-conference, FAO will be reporting on the process of the IYFF and its efforts to mainstream ComDev in agricultural and rural development policies to advance family farming. Another important objective of FAO’s participation will be to establish partnerships in the area of capacity building in communication for rural development, taking advantage of the regional platforms already established (Onda Rural, ComDev Asia and Yenkasa Africa) and the specialized global network Collaborative Change Communication ([CCComDev](#)), that facilitates knowledge sharing on good practices and offers information on training opportunities.

ComDev prospects at FAO

At present there is increasing recognition of the role of ComDev in promoting multi-stakeholders dialogue among policy makers and social leaders to advance agricultural policies and programs. In order to make this dialogue more inclusive, it is necessary to listen to and to raise the voices of the affected rural population, smallholders’ organizations and family farmers. Within this process, the role played by community media, such as radio, is key to channel people’s views and ensure participation.

Despite institutional changes, ComDev continues to be a relevant area of work for FAO to achieve its strategic objectives and corporate priorities, such as e.g. family farming. In this context, the ComDev Team is requested to target key initiatives, to provide specialized technical assistance and to showcase the added value of its interventions.



Bangladesh: Use of community media for awareness raising on climate change @FAO/G. Napolitano

The three upcoming events presented in this article are expected to reinforce the ComDev Team's partnerships and networking, and to improve activities at global and field level. For instance, the UN Round Table will make it possible to identify synergies and linkages with other agencies in order to maximize the impact of FAO's interventions within the UN system. FAO's participation in IAMRC's pre-conference is in turn expected to strengthen existing partnerships with academia and research institutions in relation to policy analysis for mainstreaming ComDev and advancing methodologies for impact evaluation. At the same time, the ongoing partnership with AMARC will allow the collaboration with the community media and civil society organizations to advocate for ComDev policies as part of family farming and rural development.

Advocating for ComDev among different stakeholders and within FAO is essential to position communication in the rural development agenda at the international level and as a crosscutting area of work within the new organizational strategic framework. Undoubtedly, 2014 is a crucial year for ComDev at FAO. It brings new challenges in relation to providing equitable access to knowledge and information to rural people and making projects more participatory and sustainable. At the same time, new opportunities are being provided for mainstreaming ComDev as part of the policies related to family farming and the post-2015 agenda. Nevertheless, to achieve its full potential ComDev must face the unavoidable challenge to produce solid evidence and to promote a common agenda to eradicate hunger and malnutrition worldwide.

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² See <http://www.ifad.org/events/iyff/infographic.htm> [accessed 9 April 2014]

³ A shared definition of ComDev was reached at the World Congress of ComDev organized by FAO and the World Bank in Rome in 2006: “ComDev is a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. ComDev is about seeking change at different levels including listening, establishing trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change. It is not public relations or corporate communication.” (World Bank, 2007)

⁴ See <http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/> [accessed 9 April 2014]

⁵ The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), brings together a network of more than 4,000 community radios, federations and community media stakeholders in more than 150 countries.