

Chapter 3

Promoting sustainable development through strategic communication

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Introduction

This paper illustrates the significance of Strategic Communication for Sustainable Development and its significance in the World Bank development programs and projects. While providing some brief theoretical background, the paper highlights the methodological approach being adopted by the Unit of Communication for Sustainable Development in Operations (SDO) in its initiatives, focused mainly on environmental and rural development projects. We begin by providing a brief overview of the main communication paradigms in development. This helps to position and better understand better the role of communication as adopted by the World Bank's Unit of Operational Communication for Sustainable Development, which is the topic of the second part of the paper. Also discussed are challenges faced by communication in the World Bank – challenges which are common to many other organizations and professionals in this field.

Two main challenges for communication

Personal experience and related literature confirms that communication for development is widely praised. However, despite its formal recognition within international development institutions, governments and other organizations, communication for development is far from being fully understood and systematically applied (Anyaeqbunam, et al., 1998). There are a number of reasons for this; ranging from the perception of communication as important but secondary to other more technical disciplines, to the insufficient empirical evidence of the impact of communication, and consequently, the fact that many policy and decision-makers “remain unconvinced of the importance of communication in the development process, at least in so far as concrete action from them is concerned.”¹

One of the main remaining challenges for development communication is illustrating the nature of this discipline, of crucial importance in virtually any development intervention, and how it differs from traditional notions of communication (i.e. sending messages, disseminating information or doing corporate communication). That is why the first questions to be addressed are “why communication?” and “what kind of communication?” Often presenters and speakers of “communication” use the term intending a specific kind of communication (e.g. corporate, mass media, etc.) and the listeners understand “communication” as something quite different (e.g. dialogue, advocacy, etc.). This is especially true in a discipline as relatively new as development communication, in which the term is conceived and adopted in numerous and sometimes inconsistent ways.

What kind of communication

It is important to first achieve common understanding of the term “communication”. Communication can be conceived and defined in a number of different ways, but this does not mean that only one among these is correct and the others are wrong. The various definitions of “communication” reflect the diversity of communication objectives, approaches and functions.

Consider some of the broad communication approaches, each of which can operate within one or more of the three basic communication “modalities” or modes; i.e. mass, interpersonal and mediated (through radio, internet or other technologies) communication. The classification of communication approaches below reflects that adopted by the World Bank (and is similarly adopted many other institutions).

Corporate/institutional communication

With a number of uses, corporate or institutional communication can refer to the improvement of communication flow within an institution, to the strengthening of the capacity/skills of the employees, or to promoting the image or positioning of an institution or a sector (corporate communication) with specific audiences (e.g. general public, policy-makers, board of directors, etc.).

Advocacy

Advocacy implies using communication to foster an agenda or raising awareness on specific issues (e.g. AIDS, poverty alleviation, etc.). Communication approaches in this context are often closely related with journalism and they usually rely heavily on mass media.

‘Development Communication’

This is also frequently referred to as ‘Communication for Development’. While incorporating some of the approaches illustrated above, it goes beyond them by using communication to identify, investigate and analyze needs, risks and problems to be addressed. Development Communication can be defined as a “dialogue-based process entailing the strategic application of communication approaches, methods and/or technologies for social change”.

This definition includes some crucial features of Development Communication. First, it is a process; second, it is an analytical activity based on dialogue (as will be explained later); and, third, it aims to achieve change. This implies that to be most effective it should be used from the beginning of the development intervention, i.e. identification and assessment of priorities and not just in the planning and implementation stages. If there is no communication assessment in the beginning, the process would be flawed and could hardly be regarded as Development Communication.

An overview of the main communication perspectives in the Development context

In order to better understand the different models and approaches related to Development Communication, let us briefly revisit the main theoretical communication frameworks in this field.

Modernization paradigm

There is a long tradition of communication used for development purposes. The modern concept of development can be said to have started in 1949 when President Truman stated that the role of rich countries was to address the “underdevelopment” of others (Sachs, 1992). The main objective has not changed much since: fight the poverty that has affected more than half of the world. This entails a worldwide program to support local economies, while at the same time promoting the spread of democratic values and institutions. Truman made it clear that achieving greater production, through the application of scientific methods and technological knowledge, would lead to peace and prosperity for the whole world. Following this line of thought, for many years development has been considered mainly, if not exclusively, in economic terms.

At that time the challenge was to make the poorer countries follow in the footsteps of the richer ones. The role of communication was to promote the spread of those values and attitudes conducive to the establishment of economic environments similar to those of the developed countries, while at the same time providing more technical support for the diffusion of innovations aimed at practical improvements. Communication was primarily conceived as the use of mass-media in a one-way, top-down process, following the traditional Sender-Message-Receiver model (Melkote, 1991).

Dependency theories

In the 1970s, the modernization paradigm was increasingly under fire because, among other things: it neglected the relevance of local social, political and cultural context; it expected development to occur along a consistent well-defined linear sequence; and it put the blame on developing countries for their conditions – ignoring the historical circumstances that led to their subordinate positions and kept them dependent on other richer ones (Servaes, 1991). This perspective is known as the “Dependency Theory” and here communication was seen mainly as a tool to educate the people and forge alliances among developing countries. As in the modernization paradigm, here too the main emphasis was on mass media which were expected to be placed under the supervision of the state, with the assumption that the state would represent the best interests of the citizens.

There have been other theoretical models related to this one, the most important being the “World-System Theory” developed by Wallerstein (1982), in which scholars recognized a more articulated reality than the simple linear relations of dependency between rich and poor countries. However, all of these theoretical perspectives soon came under fire. A major reason was that they tended to ignore the dynamics within developing countries (e.g. media under the control of the state did not guarantee a more horizontal and people-based flow of information).

Consequently a new perspective – based on people’s participation – started to gain ground. Although this perspective is sometimes referred to as the participatory paradigm, in reality it has not yet become a paradigm. As the term implies, it envisions the active involvement of stakeholders in the development process, which is seen not only as a key value in the worldwide process of democratization, but it is also considered necessary to the validity and sustainability of development programs/projects.

Participatory paradigm

Most development agencies and international organizations are now convinced of the importance of actively involving and accounting for people’s perceptions, opinions and beliefs in the decision-making process. It should be clear that participation is based on communication (i.e. dialogue defined as the use of two-way communication aiming to analyze and solve key issues. What is often less clear is that in order to design a valid and sustainable project, participation is needed, but not sufficient. A communication needs assessment carried out in 1994/95 in Southern Africa (Anyaeibunam et al., 1998) revealed that the wide adoption of participatory approaches, while being based on a horizontal model of communication, seldom resulted in a specific systematic communication strategy. What was needed was an approach that combined the people-based approach of participation with a systematic communication focus. In the related literature, this approach is labeled ‘Participatory Communication’.

While terms such as ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ have gradually gained increased recognition in the world of development, communication based on a horizontal two-way flow of communication is still an elusive concept. This is partially due to the ambiguity of the term, as discussed above, but it is also due to the difficulty experienced by many communication practitioners in switching from the traditional (and more manageable) one-way communication model, “Sender → Message → Receiver”, to a more appropriate and complex model of “Decision-maker A ↔ Dialogue ↔ Decision-maker 1,” where

communication is no longer restricted to informing or persuading audiences, but is a process involving two or more parties within which situations are assessed; knowledge and experiences shared; problems analyzed; solutions identified; and finally strategies designed and agreed upon. The systematic and professional use of communication goes far beyond the common notion of being a communicator; it requires a sound knowledge of theoretical perspectives, models and methodologies, as well as familiarity with the implications of strategic application of the approaches.

The participation and empowerment of people cannot be achieved without a kind of communication, based on a horizontal model, open to any outcome, ensuring a two-way flow of information, knowledge and experiences. In other words, communication that empowers people (Freire, 1997) and that puts them in the driver’s seat throughout the development process. This model, which is gaining more and more significance in the development world, is based on dialogue, in which listening is as important as talking. The aim is building trust and consensus in order to investigate perceptions, needs, risks, opportunities and problems, and only then work on the design of strategies leading to change. This does not mean that the more traditional kind of communication should disappear. On the contrary, mass media approaches are very effective in disseminating information, raising awareness and other similar activities. To summarize let us present a table with three basic communication features for each of the perspectives.

Modernization	Dependency	Participation
Core Value: media as diffuser of modern attitudes and innovations	Core Value: media as a means to achieve autonomy	Core Value: dialogue as the center of communication processes
Rationale: to disseminate information to large audiences	Rationale: to educate people and forge alliances among developing countries	Rationale: sharing perceptions, knowledge and experiences to achieve an action plan for change
Basic Model: one-way communication	Basic Model: one-way and two-way communication	Basic Model: two-way communication

Table 1: A communication comparison of three development paradigms.

Methodological and operational issues

The methodological approach adopted by the Development Communication Division is a combination of the knowledge and experiences of organizations in this field and the unique operational context of the World Bank. Based on previous discussion, the methodology in Communication for Sustainable Development should be linked with the current broader perspective on development. Accordingly, communication should not be considered exclusively as a process whereby information is transmitted, coded and decoded. Communication becomes, also, a problem-posing proposition (Bordenave, 1976), a research tool (Anyaeibunam et al., 1998), a planning tool (Mefalopulos and Kamlongera, 2003) and a necessary process needed to involve stakeholders in the decision-making of development initiatives.

This should occur through dialogue, a needed component in the empowerment of the poor and marginalized (Freire, 1997). Also, communication cannot be concerned exclusively with behavior change in its narrowest conception. In this context, behavior change refers to a wider notion of social change, which includes behaviors, practices and/or the

restructuring of institutions. No matter what kind of change is sought, development communication should play a crucial role in achieving it.

Before detailing the methodology, we should briefly highlight the main types of interventions carried out by the Unit in support of field operations. The numerous different types of communication interventions in support to operations performed by the Development Communication Division can be grouped into (1) 'Participatory Communication', (2) public communication campaigns and (3) institutional strengthening. In many ways the boundaries between the three are not clear-cut (e.g. a communication campaign is usually more in line with a unidirectional mass-media approach, but the research for the appropriate message design can be carried out in a participatory mode).

1. 'Participatory Communication'

Participatory communication can be used in a variety of situations. It is most meaningful when used for assessing the situation and devising solutions through dialogue among representatives of all parties. This should lead to the appropriate and sustainable identification of the project/program objectives and to the design of the related communication strategy.

2. Public communication campaigns

Public communication campaigns are used when objectives have been determined and the main role for communication is to design effective messages persuading the audience to take action leading to change, usually in certain behaviors. The kinds of change sought here can typically be in the field of health, environment or wider economic reforms.

3. Institutional strengthening

Institutional strengthening is another line of intervention used by the Unit. The objectives here can be of three different kinds:

- i) those aimed at communicating the nature and purpose of the institution and/or program to the public and relevant institutions. This helps to position the concerned institution while promoting the activities carried out;
- ii) another kind of objective in this category concerns the internal flow of communication and how to improve the exchange of information within the institution. The same process can be applied to the exchange of information among institutions with a common interest;
- iii) finally, institutional strengthening is also concerned with capacity building – providing training on the processes and products of communication to personnel within the institution.

In order to understand how challenging communication for sustainable development can be, it is important to keep in mind (in addition to the difficulties associated with the construction of any new path) the weight that the traditional paradigm still carries in the theoretical and practical implications of everyday operations. In the past, the World Bank has often been critiqued for being too top-down in its approaches. Nevertheless, more recently the Bank has tried to adopt an approach that is more in line with the new participatory framework which has become the driving force of development. Jim Wolfensohn, the president of the World Bank, has been instrumental in formalizing the mandate for the inclusion of broad stakeholders' participation throughout the design and implementation of development projects and programs.

Key to our work is that communication is not just an instrument to send or disseminate information. It is first and foremost an analytical instrument, based on dialogue. No matter what kind of development intervention is expected, communication should always be present from the very beginning as it can bring a value-added insights that no other approach can. While overlapping with other disciplines (e.g. participatory appraisals,

social assessments, marketing research, etc.), development communication is the only discipline specifically using dialogue to share and investigate experiences, needs, problems and perceptions among stakeholders. Moreover, it is the only discipline coming up with specific entry points upon which to build the communication strategy. To make this clear let me briefly explain how communication for sustainable development can be divided in three stages:

The process of strategic communication

As stated, communication is a process along which a number of approaches, tools and products can be identified and implemented according to the circumstances. For clarity's sake, this process can be structured in three basic, broad phases.

1. Communication research → problem analysis

In the first stage we need to identify all relevant inputs for our communication strategy. The function of communication is mainly analytical. Dialogue becomes a tool to identify relevant stakeholders, probe their perceptions, investigate their needs and problems, share knowledge and identify the causes of the situation that we intend to change. Communication here supports other analytical work by building trust, facilitating the exchange of information and reaching a common understanding of the situation. A number of empirical, quantitative and qualitative tools are applied in this phase (such as opinion polls, surveys, Participatory Communication Rural Appraisal and others). At this stage, the final output of communication is the definition/refinement of the communication objectives and not the objectives of programs and projects. This is no minor achievement and many development initiatives have had their roots in projects that did not deal with the top-priorities of the so-called beneficiaries and that were considered unclear and not feasible.

A baseline study is carried out and communication is used (usually in a participatory manner) to identify and set indicators and criteria for evaluation, to later be used to monitor the communication programme implementation and assess the impact of the communication strategy.

Depending on the circumstances, the following information should have been collected by the end of this phase:

- common understanding of the issue to be changed among all stakeholders;
- in-depth knowledge (i.e. cultural, social, economic background) of stakeholders groups and their position on the issue of relevance (in this case environmental);
- knowledge of the information and communication (internal and external) network of the stakeholders;
- definition of objectives clearly understood and agreed upon by all parties. The emphasis here is what we want to achieve.

2. Communication design and implementation → problem solving

At this stage, communication applications have a function which is more in line with the usual conception of communication. Nevertheless it can be used in a number of different ways according to the needs. The following are some of the most frequently used communication approaches, which are by no means mutually exclusive: dialogue, social marketing, advocacy/lobbying, dissemination of information, institutional strengthening, capacity building (training/education) and community mobilization.

These approaches can be used individually or combined to achieve the intended goals. The point to emphasize here is that their selection and application will be decided in relation to the objectives set in the previous stage. If, for example, the objective is to

inform policy-makers about the findings of an environmental assessment conducted in a country, communication approaches should focus on disseminating the information (so long as we think that this would be enough to achieve our broader goal). Alternatively, we may need to adopt a more persuasive approach (such as advocacy) if we know the primary audience are law-makers requiring convincing rather than just informing. Once more, this is why the communication research work is so important. It is important to know what we want to achieve, but we also need to know a lot about our audience and other background information on the issue.

3. Communication monitoring and evaluation → solution assessment

Having set the indicators and criteria for evaluation in the first phase of the communication process (Communication Research), these are used to monitor and assess the communication strategy in the third phase.

These three phases should facilitate comprehension of development communication at a macro level. In the first phase (i.e. problem-analysis) communication is an analytical tool, listening and dialogue are key instruments to investigate and assess the situation. In the second phase (i.e. problem-solving) communication is used to address and solve the situation, and ultimately bring change. In the third phase (i.e. solution assessment), overlapping with the other ones, communication is used to investigate and monitor progress, as well as assess change.

Conclusion

This paper is intended to give an overview of the development communication activities carried out by the Unit of Operational Communication for Sustainable Development in support of field operations. The challenges development communication has to face remain numerous. The main one consists of how to systematically mainstream communication in development interventions. This is strictly related to two challenges that development communication specialists have to face.

The first challenge is to position communication with managers and other decision-makers. Professional communicators should pay more attention to integrating and fine-tuning development communication intervention within management workplans and project-cycle activities from the beginning. Managers should be able to easily assess the costs and benefits of communication, and to do this they need to be able to see clearly when and how communication can be applied to the process. It is up to communicators to highlight these connections (i.e. entry points) and make sure that there are no inconsistencies between communication and the rest of the process.

The second challenge, while still focusing on promoting the value-added of this discipline, relates to development communication practices. Communicators need to be more systematic and assertive in providing empirical evidence on the impact of communication in development initiatives. This would entail a tighter quality control on the overall intervention. To achieve this, there should be clear criteria about the background required by development communication specialists. He/she should at least have a comprehensive knowledge of the theoretical and methodological systems in this discipline; have field experience; be knowledgeable about development programs and project cycles; be culturally sensitive, have a humble and open attitude towards people and change; and, most importantly, be willing and able to listen actively. Without these skills a communicator will be just another communicator and, as it is often cited, every person is a communicator, but we would like to add that not every person is a professional communicator!

Notes

1. This statement was written in the Communication for Development Roundtable Report, FAO. Rome, Italy, 1991 attended by leading specialists and institutions in this field.

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