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Communication and the Millenium Development Goals

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Last December Sweden adopted a new policy for global development that emphasises the concepts of shared responsibility and policy coherence. The overall goal - to contribute to equitable and sustainable development - and two policy perspectives; the rights perspective and the perspective of the poor, apply to all policy areas.

The specific goal for Sweden's development co-operation is to help create conditions that will enable the poor to improve their lives. This goal, underpinned by the two perspectives, The Rights perspective and the perspective of the poor, sharpens the poverty focus of Swedish development cooperation. It is not a change of direction since poverty alleviation has been our goal for the last 40 years, but the new policy implies an increased ambition.

This is the policy platform we stand on as we continue our work towards the Millenium Development Goals.

To date Sida has no overall communication strategy for the development cooperation to meet the Millenium Development Goals. And, our policy when it comes to media support is not quite in pace with the overall priority of poverty reduction and the MDGs. as the function of media on poverty reduction is not fully recognised in the policy. We will initiate work towards a new media policy within short. However, it should be said that looking at our project and programme support catalogue to media development we can say that the relevance to poverty reduction is quite substantial.

Now, how will this new general Sida policy with a sharper focus on poverty reduction, and the MDGs, affect our coming media policy and the support to media in developing countries?

I think that the perspective of the Poor and the Rights perspective will require increased participation of poor people themselves in the work to achieve the MDGs. The perspectives emphasize the importance of media that involve the poor as significant actors in information and communication processes.

My interpretation so far of the new development cooperation strategy puts focus on the medias´ ability to supply the public with information and communication that eventually will contribute to capability growth of poor men and women, to become principal actors in their own development, to get wider choices in their priority areas of concern, to increase their power as well as their material resources to make a better living.

A focus will also be needed on the pre-requisites of the media to contribute to make Freedom of Expression and Right to Information a reality also for poor men and women.

I would like to address our future vision of the role of communication in meeting the Millenium Development Goals by concentrating on one of the Goals, namely To halt the spread of Hiv and Aids.

Sida has supported a study by Panos Southern Africa that give insights on this issue.

Today some 30 million people in Africa are infected by the virus, only an estimated 10 percent of them are aware that they are infected. The rapid spread of the pandemic is affected by unequal power structures in society, by women´s subordination, by sexual violence, by ignorance and by silence. In many countries knowledge among the poor about hiv and aids is still very limited, the pandemic is followed by rumours and misinformation, by stigmatization and exclusion.

Given the extent of the spread of hiv and aids in Southern Africa, I believe that the media has a tremendously important role to play in information and communication processes combating hiv and aids. This is one of the most important issues for future media support in this region and for reaching the MDG's in Africa.

The study by Panos , carried out in eight countries in Southern Africa, confirms the increased role of the media in producing and distributing information on hiv and aids. Even where there are various stakeholders creating public awareness and providing education on the pandemic, the media is inevitably the major means of communication.

The quantity of stories on Hiv and aids has increased tremendously over the years, a positive spin-off from the liberalisation of the media in most of southern Africa.

Increased supply, yes , but also a marked improvement of the quality and language used by journalists in their coverage of hiv and aids. The media has generally been moving away from using language that evoked feelings of stigma and discrimination.

However the variety is wide and there are still many examples of stories encouraging stigmatization due to poor knowledge, understanding and interest of the reporter and low priority of the media organisation.

There are also shortcomings in reporting about hiv and aids in terms of failing to decode technical jargong, uninspiring writing skills and styles, lack of proactive and investigative journalism...

The media still remains the major source of information about hiv and aids in the region.

Why then do the media report the way they do?

--There are quite a few reasons for this. In most cases journalists, who have not been spared of the effects of the pandemic have tended to treat hiv and aids as a task for other actors, such as NGOs and governments. As a result hiv and aids comes low on their editorial agenda.

--In some cases poor relationships between the media and other actors in the fight against hiv and aids hampers effective coverage. Some organizations do not know how to work with media. And media have been slow moving away from merely putting out hiv and aids messages to fostering an environment where the voices of those most affected by the pandemic can be heard.

--The change in perception of Hiv and aids from a purely health issue to a multisectoral, development issue has been so rapid that media has not been able to respond fast enough to this new approach to hiv and aids.

--The task of fighting the pandemic is complicated and expensive for the media, This explains why Hiv and aids related issues suffer unfair competition and receive less attention than other, commercially viable issues.

Some mediahouses such as the Post in Lusaka, having realized their shortcomings have made positive changes. The Post invited Mr Winston Zulu a wellknown personality and hiv positive to write about Hiv and Aids in a weekly interactive column.

The Post also contracted a medical doctor to write a weekly column on hiv and Aids The readers asked questions pertaining to their own status through the column.

Tired of being misrepresented and not having issues discussed as openly as they would have wanted, the Network of People Living with HivandAids in Zambia, approached Panos Southern

Africa for basic training in radio programming. Following the training they produced and presented 16 radio programmes, which they claimed to have had a huge following.

Generally, in the eight countries there was greater public appreciation for stories that gave hope for life and stories representing real people. Reality talks!

One and maybe the most important finding of this research is that voices of those most affected by the pandemic are popular and effective in the march towards controlling the pandemic.

What could be done to support the media?

Well, the study gives a few conclusions aiming at strengthening the media in their role in a democratic society.

--Governments should create favourable working conditions.

--Media organisations should work with other information stakeholders to promote the freedom of information legislation, apart from advocating for a general review of the laws restricting media practice and autonomy.

--There is a need to build the capacity of the media and the knowledge and skills of the individual journalist to effectively cover hiv and aids stories, to gain credibility and confidence vis a vis their sources and the public. This, together with strong efforts to keep significant actors accountable to the public when it comes to fighting the pandemic could well also contribute to erode perceptions of the media being just mouth-pieces.

The Panos report is an analysis of HIV and aids reporting in Southern Africa 2004. It could well be that the results of the study tell us some things that are relevant also in a wider

context and discussion, focusing on communication capable of contributing to make the MDGs come true.

I believe that communication adds social value to the public and that the media have a function for building this public social value. In this area of hivaids as in other target areas of MDGs

I also believe in medias ability:

to contribute to knowledge building as well as opinion building among the public,

but also to contribute to transparency and critical scrutiny in society, among others to monitor if public money are used for the right purposes,

to contribute to hold responsible actors accountable and to the rule of law and justice but also to contribute to the spread of human rights values, tolerance, respect and inclusion in society.

I also believe in ICT as a technical tool, especially when the use is focused on existing information and communication needs in priority areas of the public and not on sheer availability.

The use of ICT in hybrid combination with media and other distribution channels facilitates crosscutting information and communication for knowledge as well as opinionbuilding.

Thus ICT can give strength to the media and contribute to increased knowledge. People want to know!

Media is the nervous system of society. If this system does function well it will have consequences for the whole society.

It is when the media system also involve poor people as significant stakeholders and participants that media can play its most important role to reach the MDGs.

Thank you for your attention.

