Communication for Social Change: The New Communicator
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Whatever we plan for the future in terms of social change should associate in one strategy the objective of social change, the knowledge of new technologies and the process of communication. None of these alone can achieve, and the three together can't either if the human factor is not in the essence of the reflection: the new communicator should be the center-piece of the communication strategies for social change in the next century.

The cemetery of development

A gloom landscape grows in many Third World countries. The more we invest in development, more we contribute to the growing of the cemetery of development, the striking vision of dust over computers that only worked a few months, water pumps that lasted one or two years only, huge construction machines on the side of roads that were never completed...

I've seen in a small town of Burkina Faso a brand new construction for a hospital which never opened its doors because there were no nurses and doctors to run it. I've seen two thousand post office mail boxes rusting under the rain in a village of five hundred illiterate families who neither received or wrote letters. I've seen water being wasted during months (a path of mold went down on the street) from a tap at a very dry village in the south Saharan belt known as Sahel, because nobody would spend about 3 US$ dollars to buy a part to repair the faucet. I've seen expensive and sophisticated OB vans (mobile television studios) grounded for years because their tires were flat. In Nigeria, UNICEF donated to the government more than one thousand 4 x 4 jeeps and pick-ups during the immunisation campaigns of 1988-1990, few are still on the road. The backyard of the Ministry of Education in Haiti looks like a cemetery of automobiles; brand new jeeps donated by the international cooperation agencies are piled after being virtually destroyed by accidents or due to the absolute lack of maintenance.

Anyone that has worked in developing countries could draw up a similar or even bigger list. And anyone that has experience working with international developing agencies or NGOs, knows that these things happen every day and that we are often obliged to close our eyes in order to avoid "conflict" with government partners. Corruption is obviously part of it and the international developing system, call it United Nations, USAID, or any other name, has been somehow hiding the implications that it has for social development.

The challenges of community ownership

Almost everybody now -from the smallest community based NGO to the development gurus at the World Bank in Washington- seem to agree that projects fail because the community is not involved. The nature of projects was decided without any form of dialogue with the community of so called "beneficiaries". Vertical projects are not sensitive to social and cultural aspects of reality. If participation is not encouraged, communities are passive about development projects that are supposed to improve their living conditions. Communities do not have the sense of ownership of projects that were decided and implemented with a top-down approach.

A water system was installed by technicians from the government agency with support from an international development organisation. Who owns the project? We have at least three different scenarios: a) the project never involved anybody from the community, b) community was only invited to "contribute" with labor, or c) once the project is almost completed, community is invited to "organise" and take over.

It is obvious that from these three scenarios we are likely to expect a non-sustainable project. The community is at the most challenged with a new responsibility, with no preparation for it. When the first hand pump breaks down, people just wait until somebody from the government shows up to repair it.

Community participation can not "fix" the problem afterwards, it should be a component as important as the funding and it should be developed along with the funding process. No funds, no project in the short term. No participation, no project in the long run. Actually, participation is the way how the community funds the project

Every body seems to know this. Any publication by UN agencies or bilateral development agencies will state the importance of community participation and community ownership of projects. How many of these agencies translate what is written on paper to an actual process at the community level? Most of them simply don't know how to do it. Community participation may be the hottest trend in development (though NGOs were working on it for years) but is mostly words, not facts. It may even be part of the World Bank's or UNDP policy in development countries, but there is no mechanism to guarantee it will happen.

To start, few agencies have at the field level people that have certain knowledge and experience in community participation. Most of them just improvise by adding the participation and communication tasks to the job description of any professional, regardless of his or her academic background and experience. Often, the responsibility is given to experts who spend most of their time flying from one continent to another, attending important programme meetings, reading and drafting sharp documents with recommendations, but have little or no experience of working at the community level. They miss the whole cultural dimension of development.

A quick look at the profile of field staff in most developing organisations shows that if there is anyone in charge of the "participation" aspect, this is usually someone of a lower professional level. That is why many of these organisations often rely on NGOs for the "participatory" approach. But even within the NGO world, what is the profile of an "expert" in participation? How are the specialists recruited? Which is their background? A professional from the social sciences, education, anthropology or sociology might be in a better position to understand participation than an economist or an engineer. At a few international agencies, like UNICEF or FAO, communicators are in charge of the community participation component. This is, at least, an acknowledgment of the role of communication in development. The problem is, what is the profile of "communicators" in most of the development agencies?

Information and Communication

In the early nineties, UNICEF realised that its information and communications officers at the field level were appointed under about 50 different names. From the straight forward "communication" or "information" officer, to "social mobilisation", "advocacy", "development support communication", "community mobilisation", "social marketing", "development communication", "media", "external relations", "public relations" officers.

Even the distinction between "communication" and "information" is not very clear to many. As it is true that the word "communication" is a wider concept that contains all the others, it is also important to make the difference between the one-way (information) and the two-way (communication) process. It helps at least to distinguish the journalists from the communicators.

Journalist are often labeled as experts in communication. There is little knowledge about how the communication work covers a very wide range of skills that a journalist is not prepared to deal with. A journalist is prepared to work with the media, to write, to report, to produce for radio, television and newspapers. By appointing journalists to posts that are designed for specialists in communication, agencies are already doing a choice to work mostly towards mass media.

Nonetheless, there is little choice. There are thousands of journalists but very few specialists in communication. The schools of journalism can be counted by hundreds in the whole world, each one producing every year dosens of journalists or public relations professionals. On the other hand, there are no schools to train communication professionals. Many universities decided to

change the name to their school of journalism, but the contents remains almost the same in the apparently new "schools of social communication".

Information has been too easily merged with communication. Actually, it might be important to remember that from its etymological origin communication is participation.

The new communicator

A new communicator is usually someone who owes at least 50% of his or her qualification to a wide range of experiences that have little to do with his or her own academic background. What actually makes the "new communicator" is this mixture of experience in development, a special sensibility to work with communities, and the knowledge of communication tools and technologies. A new communicator has to balance a very practical approach to social reality, with the capacity to elaborate and conceptualise strategies.

The academic background is somehow irrelevant, given the fact that there are no institutions that provide specific training of this type. Educators, anthropologists, agronomists often make good communicators when they add to their field experience on development and community participation the knowledge of the communication process and the skills to handle information technologies. Journalists already have this knowledge, though limited to the media, but they can also become new communicators -enriched with a holistic vision of communication- if exposed to the experience of development and community work.

This is not to say that only inter-personal communication is needed in the context of social change. The community based approach is often a result of the total lack of access to the information channels. It can be the only possible strategy given the extreme process of marginalisation that some communities may suffer. Nonetheless, the new technologies have recently opened enormous possibilities in terms of the horizontal cultural exchanges that communities and individuals can develop across the world. The meaning of *community* may broaden to groups that have common interests though from different cultures. Access is gradually being granted (or taken by assault) by social groups and individuals that were previously marginalised.

The use of electronic media for social change has already seen an impressive evolution. Since the fifties many associations, unions, community groups or NGOs, have challenged the dominant radio and television networks with small stations broadcasting towards specific communities. While bigger and bigger trusts are concentrating the control of the most influential mass media in the world, alternative networks of information and communication are flourishing often supported by the use of Internet.

The challenges of communication are constantly evolving, as new possibilities but also new needs emerge. The new communicator has the capacity to navigate from one media to another, to choose between the multiple communication tools and adapt strategies to a particular situation. His or her experience may range from helping to strengthen union organisations to covering social issues for media stations, devising participation strategies for development projects at the community level, facilitating the networking of non-governmental organisations, and/or producing educational materials. This flexibility to use communication strategies in various cultural contexts provides a training that is second to none.

The following could be the main premises for the new communicator:

1. The new communicator must be equipped with the understanding that technology is a tool and nothing else but a tool. Technology may support the communication process, but the latter should not be totally dependent on it. Also, it is important to understand that technology doesn't only involve computers, satellites and Internet. A pencil is an

astonishing piece of technology, and communication techniques that have proved their efficacity range from popular theater to community murals.

2. The new communicator must deeply understand that communication for social change deals essentially with culture and a very special sensitivity is needed to support the process of social change in a developing world that has nothing else to hold on to than its cultural identity. Development and social change must be possible within a process of horizontal and respectful cultural exchanges.

3. The new communicator must be familiar with this concept: in communication for social change the process is more important than the products. In journalism, the articles, the video documentaries, or the radio programmes are valuable results for a skilled professional. But in social change and development, the process of communication with the people and within the communities is more important than the printed or audio-visual aids that may emerge from that dynamic. Is in the process of communication and participation that social change starts to happen.