

COMMUNICATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT-- Dream and Reality

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1. Development has three interrelated but analytically separate lines of definitions:

a) Development is concerned with increased production of material goods and services. This is a notion of development as economic growth, where the focus is largely on quantitative problems of production and utilisation of resources.

b) Development is concerned with change in the nature of social relations, societal goals, attitudes, values, etc. and in the distribution of material goods; this is the notion of social development where focus is on qualitative and distributional changes in societies through elimination of discrimination and structurally determined exploitation; the creation and assurance of equal opportunities and more equitable distribution of benefits of economic growth amongst the people who create them.

c) Development is concerned with political sensitisation, orientation and polarisation which form a conducive environment for the attainment of economic and social development.

In theory rural development is expected to synthesize these three components into a human-centered strategy, plans and activities. But, in practice the current systems have in the main favoured conventional economic growth at the expense of this. Despite the fact that national development plans, government declarations, bilateral and multilateral agencies' mandates contain well-meaning elements, actual pledges to grassroots activities in terms of funds and manpower appear negligible. For some mysterious reason a prior belief exists that well functioning government agencies and institutions-- be they in planning, agriculture, communication/information, education or health-- can make things happen by "pushing buttons from a central switchboard." Unfortunately this only holds if the people themselves are playing an active part in a joint venture from the very beginning. Unless the latent individual and group dynamism of the population are freed, educated and fully utilised governments could well remain in a self-satisfying, relatively sheltered mini-world of inefficient bureaucracy and political representation.

The problem certainly lies in the history of most developing countries. Under colonial rule or dictatorships countries were administered from above without encouraging real communication and participation from the bottom. Unfortunately this has been allowed to continue to dominate the scene after independencies.

The most important lessons learnt from analysing and studying literature on rural

development models over the last two decades include the following:

- Rural development should be a comprehensive, well balanced process of political, social and economic development;

- A comprehensive communication strategy, plans and activities focussing on behavioural change through knowledge and skills acquisition must form an integral part of rural development concepts, strategy and programmes;

- Bottom-up planning and decision-making and popular participation are *sine-qua-non* to success;

- Rural societies have a wealth of knowledge and tradition which should be respected and utilised;

- Equitable land distribution and land ownership are major prerequisites for social peace and self-reliance;

- Multi-level linkages of local community organisations and effective decentralisation of authority and of financial control are common features of countries which have a successful rural development experience;

- Rural development programmes require careful political and social analysis of the environment; baseline data surveys should be compulsory and form the quantitative foundation for any rural development scheme;

- Careful choice of innovative technology is absolutely necessary because farmers or other beneficiaries in rural areas could become confused and even more dependent on the outside;

- It is advisable to involve farmers in research programmes in order to introduce them to innovation;

- Extension services have to focus on the small farmers; traditionally they tend to co-operate with larger farmers which is easier; a contact farmer in each village can facilitate and support monitoring the work of the extension services;

- Current credit programmes often reinforce economic and social disparity;

- Projects should be simple and of a catalytic nature. Many costly activities sponsored from outside do not fit into the environment and cannot be sustained at the point of local takeover. Huge capital inputs and separate project authorities reduce the chance of replicability;

- Small farmer organisations tend to be successful when (a) they organise around a concrete goal achievable in a limited period; (b) they start with a simple task to be carried out in a way which minimizes the need for scarce skills and which needs co-operation and (c) the groups are small.

2. Communication, broadly speaking, is the process through which human beings share social and cultural interactions, information, knowledge, experience, ideas, skills, motivations and aspirations. One of the end results is or may be atti-

tudinal or behavioural change, through knowledge and skills acquisition. It is necessary to state this obvious fact because too many people concerned with development work still tend to think that they are talking about communication, when, in fact, they are restricting themselves to communication aids, such as posters, billboards, one-way TV or radio programmes, etc.

Dr. K.E. Eapen (formerly at Bangalore University, India), sums up this dilemma nicely by saying, "A basic misconception of communication and change...is lack of understanding of communication as a social process and...mistaking it for transmission towers, documentary films, one-way lectures, etc.". The message and people's participation in its development are the mainstay of communication and the principal channels include: postal services, telecommunications, radio, television, satellite, data-banks, press, films, other audiovisuals, popular culture, organised interpersonal communications, commercial and trade communications, advertising, management communications and information systems, etc. Therefore, communication has social, economic and political issues and functions; and these are interrelated.

3. Community participation in development is viewed as:

- a) Mass sharing of the benefits of development;
- b) Peoples' contribution to the development effort and,
- c) Decision-making in development;
- d) Some self-reliance, power and independences at community level with an emphasis upon the potential of local resources: rural societies have a wealth of knowledge and tradition which should be respected and utilised and not merely tolerated;
- e) Integration of traditional and modern systems-- so that modernisation is a systematisation of old and new ideas-- with the exact mixture somewhat different in each locality;
- f) The quality of distribution of information, socio-economic benefits and so forth.

Critical feature or factors of this process may include:

- Level of political or national commitment;
- Reflection in national plans of community aspirations and needs;
- Extent of decentralisation of responsibilities, power and accountability;
- Degree of community capacity to organise own resources;
- Sincerity and quality of local leadership

- Extent communication flows from centre to the periphery and vice versa and intra;

- Extent and involvement of trained and dedicated personnel who are or have to spread into rural areas with a maximum of catalytic and educational impact.

4. Communication in Rural Development The most influential book about communication and development is probably Wilbur Schramm's Mass Media and National Development. When it appeared in 1964, social scientists and communicators thought that they understood the nature of development and the role of communication in development. Studies in the following decade and a half show us that the conception of development was rather limited and perhaps not entirely correct. In this conception of development, governments were expected to provide for the people and development was planned centrally to prosper on an expensive cash economy or capital intensive infrastructure in which people were rarely involved. Decisions were imposed on the people through the mass media, local councils and through self-help schemes and projects.

A Comprehensive Strategy. In social communication, the focus is on behavioural or attitudinal change and not merely the diffusion of innovations. For instance, it is the change of attitude towards excreta disposal that may "force" a person or family to construct, use and maintain a pit latrine and not the provision of the famous cement slab. To achieve a change in knowledge, attitude and practice in health matters, there must be a comprehensive communication strategy and plans in all health related programmes. Ideally, this strategy should form an integral part of any development programme which includes a health sector. In real life, this may sound unrealistic because this depends on the validity of the development strategy itself.

The strategy comprises:

- a) Analysis of problem(s) for communication components;
- b) Specification of societal values, goals, objectives, etc. (data base);
- c) Specification of communication technology, resources and services;
- d) Identifying all target groups;
- e) Setting behavioural and educational objectives for each target group;
- f) Designing activities (including staff training and advocacy) to achieve these
- g) Designing and producing messages, aids and media to support the activities (media selection and mix)
- h) Designing of an implementation workplan and schedule;
- i) Designing of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms including the specifications of quantifiable indicators;

j) Setting indicators for sectoral co-ordination or integration.

k) Evaluation of inputs and outputs. Are the objectives met and what is the impact of the programme on the health, lives, etc. of the people?

This process should be incorporated into the main programme formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases. By following this process, it is possible to nudge communications away from the piecemeal approach. For example, away from the practice of, "if it is malnutrition, let us produce a poster, flannelgraph or a radio programme", is a 'fire brigade' approach. This happens because, communication is remembered after something has already gone wrong or when the intervention does not appear to have an impact on the communities, policy makers, politicians, etc.

N.B. The evaluation and monitoring go on throughout the communication process. All messages and materials should be pretested on the target groups. The compatibility of the communication inputs to the entire programme objective need to be ascertained. This is a strategy outside the established framework of the formal school and university system aiming at relaying specific ideas, knowledge, skills, attitudes, practices in response to local felt needs, values and goals.

5. The Mass Media Magic During the past two decades, there has been a growing recognition of the value of using media-- radio, television, tape recorders and other media-- to improve the flow of information, the system of education and the process of two-way communication in developing countries, particularly in rural areas. Such communication for development campaigns has been tried in the Ivory Coast, El Salvador, Mexico, Tanzania, India, Ecuador, Senegal and other countries. But, none of these have more than a 10-year history, and in the professional opinion of both those who have worked on these projects and those who have studied them, all have had room for major improvements. Many of these improvements call for improved training, communication strategies and technologies. Mass media communication had been considered to play an important role in development, especially in conveying informative and persuasive messages from Government to the public in a downward, hierarchical way. It was thought to be a very powerful and direct force for development. Certainly, the media was expanding during the 1950's and 1960's. Literacy was becoming more widespread in most developing countries, leading to greater print media exposure. Transistor radios were penetrating every village. Hence, a predominately one-way flow of information from government development sectors (ministers and agencies) to the people. Mass media seemed ideally suited to this role. They could rapidly reach large audiences with informative and persuasive messages about details of pre-determined development. Thus, the relative power of the mass media in development was mainly assumed rather than proven.

In the last decade, research findings indicate that the role of mass communication in facilitating development has often been indirect and only contributory, rather than direct and powerful. But this varied according to circumstances as the media message, the audience, and the nature of the intended effects. In the 1970's, a number of critical evaluations were made. Some scholars, especially in Latin America, perceived the mass media in their nations as an extension of exploitative relationships with multi-national corporations controlled from outside. The

1965-1980 period saw a rising of dictatorships in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and these governments stressed the media's propaganda role, thus decreasing the public's trust of mass media.

Mass Media and Social Change In the last decade, communication researchers have questioned the efficiency and performance of some of their previous assumptions and have become especially critical of the earlier lack of attention paid to:

- a) The design and content of mass media;
- b) The need for social-structural or systems changes, in addition to communication, if development is to occur;
- c) The shortcomings of the classical diffusion and adoption of innovations or outside viewpoints which had become an important explanation of micro-level development.

But, studies in South America have shown that there is a direct relationship between the level of education, the access and use of mass media and the adoption of new ideas. Also, studies in Africa and India have indicated that education, functional literacy, change-agent contacts and cosmopolitanism were consistently related to the adoption of agricultural and health innovations. In summary, these studies and others indicate that the adoption of new ideas is generally associated with exposure to mass media, cosmopolitanism, social participation, the characteristic and complexity of the innovation and some demographic variables. The participation of members of the social system in the implementation/adaptation decision increases the level of commitment of the individuals. Participation is essential for the formulation of attitudes of the people involved.

The Press and Social Change Recently, there has been a serious discussion on how the press in developing countries can be a medium of change. To this effect, courses in development journalism have been founded in several countries. The press has a tremendous role in:

- Advocacy work amongst national policy workers and villagers on development issues;
- Disseminating ideas and research findings on development in a readable form;
- Monitoring and evaluation of the consequences of development innovations in villages;
- Writing materials for enhancing and strengthening newly acquired numeracy and literacy skills;
- Producing educational materials that facilitate behavioural change;
- Disseminating proven and efficient processes for community based educational programmes.

In these efforts, a partnership relationship and strategy between the press corps, the villagers and sectoral personnel technocrats will emerge but they have to be planned.

The Communication Effects Gap The unfortunate consequence of communication in developing countries is assisting to widen the gap in knowledge between two categories of receivers, namely, the high and low in social-economic status. The radio and TV systems favour those who can afford them and the power (batteries) required to sustain their continual use. Programmes and messages developed by the educated elite are usually geared to the middle and upper classes of the nation. The poor socio-economic communities have no say or feedback system on these (capital city generated) messages.

To deal with this serious consequential gap, the following communication strategies might be considered:

- a) Using the traditional mass media as credible channels to reach the most disadvantaged audiences;
- b) Identifying the opinion leaders among the disadvantaged segments of the total audience, and concentrate development and communication efforts on them;
- c) Using change agent aides who are selected from among the disadvantaged to work for development agencies in contacting and educating their homophilous peers;
- d) Provide means for motivation and education to the disadvantaged audience to enable them to participate in the planning and execution of their development priorities;
- e) Produce and disseminate communication messages that are redundant to the middle and upper classes because of their ceiling effect, but which are of need and interest to the lower communities. This needs a political will.

6. New Communication Technology and Approaches

a) What is the potential of new communication technology, such as satellite broadcasting, television and computers for facilitating the process of development in developing countries? Because of cost involved to the nation and individual citizens, it will probably be fairly limited for some time to come. The effectiveness of these technologies will solely depend on the social technology of how the new communication devices are organised and used. Much of the total effect of the communication system rests on well designed participatory communication strategies and programmes, software aspects and on how the audience is organised to receive and discuss the messages and how the feedback is conveyed to and utilised by the communicators at all levels including the villagers.

b) Community based media The active involvement of the community in the communication strategy design, production, pre-testing, monitoring and evaluation of the effects is an essential component of development communication. Community based media enhances the inter-active relationship between the communication systems envisaged and the village community systems involved. The specific features of other approaches are:

- All media programming is based on the needs and intents of the community;
- The involvement of the non-professional, i.e. the villagers will have a major part to play in the production;

- There is an active relationship between the communicators and villagers during the utilisation of messages and relevant communication aids.

This approach will:

- Provide alternative information and education to that distributed by traditional mass media programmes;

- Enable villagers and individuals to pursue subjects to the level which suits their needs and level of technology;

- Provide a means of communication and a flow of information tuned and tailored to community needs as circumstances require;

- Create and enhance a process of communication, in the form of a dialogue vertically between those who have information and those who need it and between those who make the decisions and the people affected by them;

- Enable groups to communicate with others at their own level horizontally, so that experience gained by one group can be available to another.

7. Applied Communication Research Media and Social Communication institutions tend to side with the "establishment" in the developing countries; hence, the content of most mass media messages is seldom designed to radically alter the existing social behaviour or structure in a society. Therefore, there is a need to allocate resources to field communication research programmes which should enable a developing country to identify and develop relevant communication systems suitable for the needs of its development programmes and citizens. Criteria and effectiveness of the various media must be established.
8. Training Communications training programmes/curricula reviewed showed that: Over the last two decades there has been more of a shift to specialised technical/sectoral training and less on integrated (behaviour-centred) training. Hence there has been a proliferation of journalists, video specialists, radio jingle experts, etc. The traditional and generalist social communication planner, whose preparation and experience cuts across behavioural sciences, economics and planning has become a rare breed. The academic world and governments in collaboration with multilateral agencies must look into this.

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