

# **The world is not enough: Sustainable communication for a sustainable planet**

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According to recent FAO reports someone dies of hunger in the world every four seconds.

Forget the 89 definitions that exist of sustainable development. There are more pressing questions now. Is our small planet unable to sustain its increasingly larger population? Or is it that the existing resources are unevenly distributed, in a manner that a minority in the world controls most of the resources, while a majority struggles to survive with dignity every day?

The state of devastation of the planet is often described with catastrophic words and images. Most of us are sensitized to the issues of climate change and environmental disasters. The right words are already part of the jargon, they are included in the political discourse as well as in the development discourse. Nevertheless, forests continue falling or burning at a higher rate than ever before, the rural population in Third World countries has little productive and to plant crops for survival, even less to plant crops to generate income.

Environment has been high in the political agenda for the best part of the last twenty years, however it seems progress is not happening in a world-wide scale. Some countries have done better than others, protecting their natural resources and utilizing them for the benefit of the most needed, but the majority of the world still operates under the implacable market laws, where devastation is the official policy. Some governments make enormous efforts to protect natural resources in spite of the pressures from companies, national and multinational, to get government hands out of any regulation.

## **Information is not enough**

Information has been central to the process of creating awareness on issues of sustainable development and other calamities threatening humanity, however, information is not enough. Information has not been enough to prevent HIV/AIDS, and it is not enough to prepare people for natural disasters and to save lives. Why?, because information does not involve people, communication does.

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Information campaigns may be useful in specific circumstances, however they do not develop the power of people to overcome the barriers of poverty. Information alone does not solve the structural issues: social, economic and political, that are the underlying causes of poverty and of unsustainable development.

Those that are familiar with communication strategies will remember the 1960s and 1970s, when development organizations believed that the cure for "underdevelopment" was the spread of information on innovations. Important schools of thought, mainly emerging in the United States, promoted the diffusion of information on new technologies to counter poverty in Third World countries. At that time food security and agriculture were on top of the agenda, today health issues and AIDS in particular have taken a higher importance. The agendas, of course, are not driven by Third World countries.

The bottom line of the approach to information dissemination was: "the poor are poor because they don't know more; if we give them information and knowledge, they will improve their lives". This approach didn't take into account that the causes of poverty were structural, not informational. In reality, peasants are poor because they don't have the best land, or any land at all. People die of common diseases not only because they don't know that vaccines could save them, but because they don't have access to health services.

It is also a problem of language and concepts, a misunderstanding that we have been carrying over the past decades, a confusion of terms: information is not knowledge. Information is data useful for knowledge, but knowledge cannot be "transferred" in the form of messages, because knowledge is what everyone of us, every individual and every community, makes of the information we receive, when we process the information according to our own knowledge and context. Individuals or communities do not acquire knowledge as something ready-made and packaged: they build it from their birth and within their culture and through the cultural exchanges and interactions in which they participate.

Information is not enough. Information can help people to enrich knowledge, but it doesn't give people the means to act collectively for social change. Too often, information is only reinforcing the status quo. Information can be a cathartic way of keeping people away from change.

This is why it is so important in our development organizations, in our policies, in our actions for development, to establish the difference between information and communication. Communication is not about messages, it is about *processes* of dialogue. Communication is not an accumulation of data, it is a way of participating in the decision making-process that informs development.

Access to information is good, but the right to communicate is better.

Through access to *information* people become part of those that receive, often passively messages on issues that affect their lives; however through *communication* people become those that act upon their lives. Access to balanced information was the most important issue when -26 years ago- UNESCO released the McBride Report and promoted the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The unbalanced information flows from rich countries to the rest of the world justified the creation of national and regional news agencies, though many of them were not able to compete with the overwhelming hegemony of the larger news agencies, such as Associated Press. Only IPS survived, with a different format.

The UNESCO attempt to provide equal access was not enough<sup>2</sup> The right to communicate, a basic human right, is still on the agenda today; it is still to be conquered.

## **Sustainability is ownership**

Much of what is discussed today about the failure to develop the world in a sustainable manner send us back to a basic principle: people who do not feel ownership on development programmes that affect their lives, do not really care about sustainable development. On the other hand, when people are involved in development programmes and projects and actively participate, then they become the main guarantee for sustainability.

But, what is to participate and to have a sense of ownership? Participation is not equal to access. Access is often limited to specific actions at the implementation stage, whereas participation has to do with involvement all along the development process. Participation in itself is a process that leads to ownership. And ownership is the ability and capacity –see Amartya Sen- to participate in the decision-making process at all stages of development. Participation allows communities to have their own development agendas r at least to discuss development agendas, equal to equal, with development planners and donors.

Sustainability is directly related to ownerships and the capacity to make decisions that are consistent with the needs of those that are the subjects -and not the objects- of development.

And why is this also relevant to communication?

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<sup>2</sup> The United States and the United Kingdom withdraw from UNESCO because of the organization commitment to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).

Because the communication process is above all a matter of ownership. People need to have ownership of the communication process to make it sustainable, because only communication processes that are sustainable can support development processes that aim for a sustainable planet.

## **The hype of new technologies**

We hear much these days about new internet-based technologies, computers, email, cellphones, etc. There is a new hype for technology, similar to the one we've seen during the 1970s. Now again, we attribute magic powers to tools: computers and the Internet. We would like to believe that problems that are structural can change by introducing telecenters so people can have *access* (again the magic word) to the information that will change their lives. It seems that we haven't learned much in 40 years.

Technologies are just tools. It can be a pencil or a computer, and the use depends on the content and the meaning for people. Right now, for the majority of people in the world, Internet and ICTs are not relevant to their lives: 90% of Internet content is irrelevant to 90% of the population in the world, particularly to the poorest of the world. And the web is 70% in English, a language that is the mother tongue for only a fraction of the world, less than 10% of the world population.

The new hype about technology has been dominating official international conferences, such as the WSIS. In some way, it has evacuated from the development agenda the social, economic and political issues that are the underlying causes of poverty. And if we look at it from the communication perspective, the official discourse is in contradiction with what peoples themselves have been struggling asking for many years: their right to communicate. It is a paradox that governments and multilateral agencies are "leapfrogging" (another buzz word) into new ICTs, when they have not been supportive of other communication processes that people themselves have initiated. It is the case of community radio, with more than 50 years of experience, at least 6,000 to 7,000 stations currently operating at the community level, culturally and politically relevant to their constituency, but often ignored or even persecuted by governments. The privatization of national resources has also damaged the processes of independent communication, as the radioelectric spectrum has been auctioned in the hands of private interests, in spite of being a natural resource which should be put at the service of social agendas.

It is a paradox that the most successful ICT projects are those that have managed to create local networks, rather than world wide webs. Local interactive webs, with content specifically create for local audiences, in local languages and on local issues, are successful as the very cited example of the MS Swaminathan Foundation in Chennai.

## The hot chain of sustainable communication

Many of us are familiar with the cold chain of immunization. For those that aren't familiar: this is a system that keeps vaccines cold all the way from the national level, to the community level, to keep them effective. It involves strategic thinking and much logistics. At a national level, the Ministry of Health usually has a national storage facility where all vaccines donated or bought overseas are kept under the ideal conditions. At the provincial level, smaller storage rooms are kept cold with conventional electricity.

However, the challenge is higher when vaccines are distributed to local governments and smaller towns, remote places with no continuous supply of electricity. In those towns, fridges and freezers that work on gas or solar panels are used. The last part of the chain are the portable cold boxes, which are used by immunization teams to carry vaccines and deliver vaccination at the community level. Vaccines can be kept for several hours on ice, depending on the outside temperature.

Maintaining the cold chain, from top to bottom, has been one of the biggest challenges of governments and international development and aid agencies, such as UNICEF or WHO. The cold chain often reveals the incompetences and corruption surrounding service delivery that is vertical and non-participatory. I've seen in Nigeria -for example- during the early 1990s, the misuse of equipment donated by UNICEF for the Extended Immunization Programme (EPI), fridges full of beer at the house of the EPI manager, and freezers where the ice had totally melted leaving vaccines just floating over the water. Thousands of children were immunized with these vaccines that were no longer effective. Or may I say, they were vaccinated, not immunized. No surprise, although in 1990 Nigeria -and other countries- claimed achieving 80% of children under two fully immunized, in reality, just two years later, the percentage was below 50%.

Why do I bring the example of the cold chain? Because I think we need a *hot* chain for sustainable communication, a process that is permanent and stable.

The hot chain of communication means that dialogue should be a continuous process at all levels, involving all stakeholders at all stages of the development process. The appropriation of the communication process is as important as the appropriation of the development process itself. Moreover, there cannot be ownership of the development process if communication is not at the core of it. From interpersonal to local media, the tools of participatory communication for social change are crucial for sustainable development.

Only people can make governments and development organizations accountable through their participation and collective action. However, the means to participate are not easily acquired. People do not participate if they cannot speak their minds and dialogue both within the communities and with development planners. For dialogue to be at the same level, in equal conditions, and for participation to be truly representative and democratic, there is no other way than communication that is participatory, that is sustainable, and that provides the tools for dialogue.

## What needs to change

Words, words, words, as in the famous passage between Hamlet and Polonius, in Shakespeare.

The words are right, the jargon is politically correct. Every one seems to have adopted the words that name communication for development and social change. We can see top level development organization officials talking about participatory approaches and communication for social change. But actions are not taking place, we can see that in their own organizations, in their policies and strategies, the concept is not being applied.

Development organizations and governments need to have a better understanding of the role of communication in sustainable development, and take actions that go beyond jargon and discourse. They need to transcend the use of communication tools for building institutional image or raising funds alone. Communication for capacity or capability building -in the sense Amartya Sen uses the concept of capability or capacity - has to be part of public and development policies, both in governments and development organizations.

Organizations need to look within their own ranks to evaluate how much they really value participation, ownership and communication for social change. We could actually make governments and development organizations accountable on the way they use communication in development by looking at concrete aspects:

- a) Do they have a policy that highlights those themes?
- b) Do they have strategies that encompass the programmes they support?
- c) Do they have qualified staff that can help to facilitate those processes of dialogue and inclusion?
- d) How much of their budget is dedicated to communication, not to promoting self image?

We need to make governments and international organizations accountable for how they use communication in development. Certainly, *accountability* is another buzz word in the jargon, very much in use these days, however the mechanisms

are not yet in place to account for communication, at least not for the way communication is implemented in development.

There is a growing number of civil society media observatories, that have been set up all over the world to look at mass media social responsibility. These observatories are fine, but they only cover mass media, not communication for development. We need a similar kind of international observatories to look after the development organizations and governments, and to represent the needs of civil society in terms of promoting communication that is inclusive, that facilitates dialogue and cares about sustainable human development.

The ultimate goal should be equally important for communities, governments and the international cooperation: development that is sustainable, a planet that is sustainable. For that, we need communication processes and policies that are also sustainable.

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