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Abstract

Although the importance of communication in development has been acknowledged as far back as the late 1950s, only now is attention focusing on the professionalism of communicator.

Communicator Roles in Third World Development

Robert A. Agunga, Ph.D.

Although the importance of communication in development has been acknowledged as far back as the late 1950s, only now is attention focusing on the professionalism of the communicator. What exactly, are, or ought to be, the functions of the communicator in development? What are, or ought to be the qualifications of a development communicator? And where are such trained professionals to be found? These questions must be answered if communication is to play a meaningful role in the development of Third World countries. The contribution of this study is that it answers the first of the three questions: What are, or ought to be, the functions of the communicator in Third World development programming?

Using qualitative methodologies, the researcher pulled together the views of several development experts on the topic. Respondents included American communication specialists who have worked in developing countries; communication scholars from all over the world, identified by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as the best in the field of development communication; and officials of development ministries from five countries in Africa.

Respondents were unanimously agreed on the functions of the professional communicator in development programming. They felt that the professional communicator must perform a multiplicity of roles. These include the following: (1) Advising governments on communication policy; (2) Assisting project managers in designing and implementing communication strategies; (3) Mobilizing and training community groups and individuals for participatory decision making; (4) Training field Extension workers in communication skills; (5) Promoting coordination and linkages among development agencies (networking); and (6) Production of multimedia and audiovisual aids. In short, the professional communicator is a facilitator, ensuring the overall success of the project or program.

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Introduction

The war on poverty in developing countries is far from being won, but aid agencies and Third World governments must be satisfied that scholars are closing in on the real culprit—communication. Since the mid-1950s, researchers have acknowledged the importance of communication in development. Just how communication can bring about development, however, is an issue that has puzzled scholars. For many decades, researchers encouraged the use of the mass media in disseminating development messages. In his book, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, Daniel Lerner (1958) emphasized the importance in modernization of the “mobile personality,” a person high in empathy who could identify with and take advantage of the opportunities a changing environment offered. Lerner argued that the mass media could serve as the “great multiplier” in development, the means of spreading new knowledge and changing the attitudes of “traditional” peoples more rapidly and broadly than ever before. Wilbur Schramm’s (1964) book, *Mass Media and National Development* equally stressed the power of “big media” (mass media) in influencing social change. In short, the emphasis has been on communication technologies rather than on the people using these technologies. The impression that was created is that the media are ends in themselves rather than simply tools at the disposal of the development communicator.

Everett M. Rogers was perhaps, the first to hint at the importance of the communicator in development. In the first edition of his *Diffusion of Innovations*, published in 1962, Rogers acknowledged the importance of the mass media in development, but he also stressed the importance of interpersonal communication. Rogers encouraged the use of Extension workers as change agents (the communicators). Bela Mody (1991) and FAO (1990) note that today, there are several million Extension workers around the world. The vast majority of them are in agriculture, but the departments of health, nutrition, family planning and education depend heavily on front-line Extension workers, too. The problem, however, is that Extension workers are trained in neither development nor in communication (Rogers, 1983; Rogers and Svenning, 1969; Roling & Engel, 1991). Even where Extension workers and audio-visual specialists have combined their efforts, the communication functions have not been fully met (Brody, 1984). The implication is that there is more to communication in development than the ability to communicate with clientele, whether face-to-face or via the mass media.

In spite of the failures of the mass media in development to date, donor agencies and Third World governments still believe that communication is the key to sustainable development. Silvia Balit (1988) says communication occupies an “ever more important place in development policies and pro-

grams and is now coming into sharper focus as experience is reviewed and evaluated" (p. 7). This paper argues that the solution to the communication problem in development can be found by analyzing the communicator, particularly, identifying what his functions are or ought to be and the training necessary to be able to perform these functions. The first step is identifying the communicator function(s) in development programming. This is precisely the task undertaken in this study.

Literature Review

A cursory review of the literature shows an overwhelming agreement among development professionals of the importance of communication in development. For example, no longer is industrialization viewed as the engine of development, but rather people involvement. In the last 20 years, the pendulum has swung in favor of people participation. Vanek (1971) observed that the quest of men and women to participate in determining activities in which they are personally and directly involved is "one of the most important socio-political phenomena of our times" (p. 1). Narula and Pearce (1986) amplify the point: "The new approach stipulated that development programs should improve the quality of life for specific persons and that the planning and implementation of these should be carried out with the people rather than for them" (p. 36). Paul (1987) adds that participation signifies the "voice" of the people in the

activities that affect them. Servaes and Arnst (1991) also contend that many world leaders and donor agencies are recognizing that in order to promote social change, they must work with the groups they wish to help to share ideas, develop new ideas, and negotiate knowledge. Today, popular participation is seen as the way to sustainable development.

Even Third World leaders now admit that without participation, there can be no development. In adopting the *African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation* in 1990, African leaders endorsed the following statement made by their colleague, President Ali Hassan Mwinyi of Tanzania:

Our major resource is our people. We all recognize the inherent relationship between people and development. We are fully conscious of the fact that the primary objective of development is to improve the living conditions of our people. But we also know that it is the people who are the principal actors in the recovery and development process. It is obvious, therefore, that the success of the recovery and development process very much depends on the effective participation of the people in that process. (p. 5).

The problem, however, is that in spite of all the declarations on popular participation by numerous development organizations, such as the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and

Rural Development (WCARRD), participatory development has been achieved more in the rhetoric than in the reality. This is because policy-makers fail to recognize that establishing a dialogue between beneficiaries and benefactors is a function of communication and, hence, the need for involving communication professionals in the planning and implementation of development projects and programs.

The paucity of qualified project and program managers makes the need for communication professionals even more urgent. William & Elizabeth Paddock (1973), in their book, *We Don't Know How*, maintain that the main cause of development failure is lack of qualified technical assistance expertise, particularly, project managers. Morgan (1984) pointed out that most development managers are graduates with engineering or agriculture degrees, with "virtually no management (or communication) training of any kind" (p. 6). Honadle, Morss and VanSant (1980) add that most integrated rural development (IRD) has failed because their managers lacked supervisory skills. McDermott (1981) stated that agricultural development is "a function of the behavior or performance of individual persons—from the Minister of Agriculture to the person with the hoe" (p. 1). To change the behavior of people involved in agriculture, he concluded, is a social science communication undertaking, not that of agronomists and animal scientists. Chambers (1983) who also studied the management of

rural development programs in developing countries, found that management as a communication specialization remains a "blind spot" in the eyes of development professionals. This sentiment is echoed by MacKenzie (1969) and the United Nations (1992) who decry the lack of professional communicators, given that communication constitutes the bulk of all management activity. Carmen (1991) notes that the current development theory, empowerment, is ideal. What is lacking, he contends, is a corresponding attention on educators who must enlighten the masses. Carmen states: "There is an equivalent to quantum theory in development. What we probably are still lacking is a Development Bohr, Einstein, or Planck" (p. 75).

While, in the short run, it may not be possible to replace development administrators for political, economic, and other reasons, their performances can be enhanced through the inclusion of communication professionals in project teams. The challenge appears to be identifying what the functions of the communicator ought to be.

Purpose of the Study

Communication students and scholars must be celebrating the increasing attention being given to communication in the international development arena. Judy Brace, Director of the Clearing House on Development Communication, says development communication is "coming of age." However, if this new enthusiasm for communica-

tion is to be sustained, it will be necessary to determine what the communicator's functions in development are or ought to be. Identifying these functions will, in turn, lead to the development of a curriculum to train such professionals. This study is significant in that it helps identify what the function(s) of the communication professional in Third World rural development projects are or ought to be.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, the researcher relied on data collected using three qualitative methodologies. The first set of information was collected using an open-ended mail questionnaire. The second set of information was gathered through content analysis. And the third set of information was obtained through participant observation.

Open-End Mail Survey of American Communication Specialists with Third World Experience. In the Summer of 1991, an open-ended questionnaire was mailed to all 90 members of the International Relations Special Interest Group of the Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE) organization, listed in the 1991 ACE Directory. ACE is the professional organization of over 600 communication specialists employed in agricultural organizations in the United States. The International Relations SIG of ACE consists of members many of whom have worked as communication

specialists in developing countries. Some had worked in a developing country or countries as much as eight years. The majority of them had worked for the United States Agency for International Development in countries such as Pakistan, India, Kenya, Liberia, Ghana, Bangladesh, and Somalia. Thus, the goal of the study was to learn from their experience. Respondents were asked to respond to one open-ended question: "What are (or ought to be) the function(s) of the communication professional in Third World rural development projects (or programs)?" It was felt that an open-ended question was the best way to get unbiased responses. The response rate was 60 percent.

Content Analysis of FAO Report on Expert Consultation on Development Support Communication. The second method of obtaining information for this study was a content analysis of an FAO document called Report of FAO Expert Consultation on Development Support Communication published in 1987. From June 8-12, 1987, the Development Support Communication (DSC) Branch, Information Division of FAO, organized an expert consultation seminar in Rome, Italy. The primary purpose was to reflect on more than 20 years of work using communication in agricultural and rural development projects in the Third World. For the first time, 15 rural communication specialists, chosen from around the world on the basis of their achievements,

were convened to analyze past experience and to provide guidance for future activities. They came from different backgrounds, experiences, and regions, and included university professors, field practitioners, and DSC specialists from both within and outside the United Nations' system.

Their differences in experience and approaches notwithstanding, a common understanding and a consensus on the best directions for communication and development in the future emerged. The findings of the Rome meeting thus are seen as contributing to a better understanding of the role of communication in rural development. The findings also provide guidelines for improving communication policies and programs. The primary task of the researcher was to review the FAO document to synthesize the main functions of the professional communicator, as identified by the participants.

Participant Observation of a Southern Africa Project Action Planning Workshop. The third source of data for the study was collected through participant observation by the researcher. The Government of Italy is financing a three-million dollar project aimed at helping the countries of Southern Africa to become self-sustaining in their project communication needs. The project is called "Development Support Communication for Southern Africa," and FAO is the executing agency.

To flesh out the case for introducing DSC to the region and to help formulate a project to assist the region develop its DSC capacity, FAO set out a strategy for participatory planning whereby representatives of selected countries of the region were invited to a workshop. The idea of the workshop was to have these national representatives join project consultants in deciding the nature of guiding principles and policies to be established, the form and structure of institutions to be organized, and the operating strategies and functions to be incorporated into them to ensure sustainability. There were 36 participants at the workshop. This number included six participants from each of five countries—Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland, Namibia, and Botswana, two observers, one representative from FAO, and three communication consultants who conducted the workshop. This researcher was one of the three consultants.

Participants from the five countries were top-level officials of government development ministries, such as agriculture, health, information, and education. Non-Governmental Agencies' officials were represented in the teams from some of the countries. Discussion at the workshop proceeded in a free and open manner and participants from the five countries openly expressed their communication needs. They also suggested ways the project could assist them. Two secretarial staff persons recorded minutes of the workshop. These minutes, to-

gether with the notes taken by the observer, reveal yet a third perspective on what the functions of the professional communicator in development are or ought to be.

Information from all three sources were analyzed as follows. The researcher sorted out what each group felt were or ought to be the functions of the professional communicator. The identified tasks for each group were then compared against the rest. Surprisingly, all three groups seemed to be saying the same thing in that the functions identified by all three groups were similar.

Why a Qualitative Approach?

Given the nature of the topic, the researcher felt that the qualitative method offered the best way to obtain information. It permitted the researcher to observe real-life situations in an unobtrusive manner. Patton (1982) says the qualitative method uses the "techniques of in-depth, open-ended interviewing and personal observation. [It] relies on qualitative data, holistic analysis, and detailed description derived from close contact with the targets of study" (p. 187). The goal of the study was not to compile numbers of "how many people said what" but to present thoughts shared by people engaged in a common course. White (1991) says the most important concern in reporting qualitative research is "how the subject [researcher] mediates facts through interpretative processes" (p. 1). Strauss and Corbin (1990) define the qualitative method as any kind of research

that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. The wealth of this study lies in the fact that it draws knowledge from three groups of people, each shedding light on the same issue, but from a different perspective.

Findings

Perhaps the main finding of the study is the similarity of the responses from the three research groups. In general, the communicator is described as a multipurpose person whose primary task is to facilitate coordination and linkages among all actors—government, researchers, extension, supply services, service agencies, rural organizations, and farmers. The communicator is viewed as a strategist. As one participant noted, he or she must be able to play "silly political games." He must also be able to perform a variety of roles. As one ACE member observed: "I have performed a communications assessment role, a training role and an actual production role for several overseas development projects." In general, the main functions of the communicator in development programming, as identified across the three groups studied, are as follows: (1) Advising government officials and subject matter specialists on communication issues; (2) Promoting participation and mobilization of beneficiaries; (3) Training Extension workers in communication strategies and skills and in the use of audio-visual materials; (4) Production of multimedia and audiovi-

sual materials; (5) Coordination and linkages; and (6) Communication planning.

Advising Government Officials and Subject Matter Specialists on Communication Issues. One of the primary activities of the communicator in development is to advise governments on communication policy. The FAO consultative group noted that the needs for communication in development must be considered in relation to "governments' recognized rural development priorities," which often center around increasing production in agriculture, family planning, and protecting natural resources. The communicator must help government officials recognize the potential for communication for reaching rural people, for determining real conditions in the rural areas, and for assisting in the systematic planning and implementation of communication as an integral component of development projects and programs. Participants at the Southern Africa project planning workshop noted that when top-level government officials become aware and are convinced of the importance of communication in development, they are more likely to release funds for communication work. The members of the ACE group noted that the professional communicator should encourage authorities to make communication an attractive career field for talented young people. One respondent noted that the communicator should be able to advise on the "nuts and bolts" of promoting information flows in projects.

Promoting Participation and Mobilization of Beneficiaries.

The second function of the communicator is to promote participatory decision-making. The FAO consultation group noted that the communicator can promote participatory decision-making by "shifting the emphasis from the top-down approach and working instead on knowledge-sharing to allow people to make informed decisions concerning adoption, adaptation, or even rejection of innovations" (p. 2). Participants at the Southern Africa project planning workshop noted that no amount of investment or provision of technology and other inputs will bring about any lasting improvements in the living standards of rural people unless they themselves generate the dynamics of their own development. The keys to helping local people take charge of their own development, participants noted, are communication and education. The communicator can create the conditions for participatory development by conducting a situation analysis, and designing, planning and conducting a systematic educational campaign. The ACE communicators interviewed noted that through a variety of educational activities, the communicator helps eradicate superstitions, social taboos, and illiteracy and helps local people become aware of the latest practical, usable information regarding family welfare, environmental degradation, and farming practices. Almost all the groups noted that the communicator has to be tactful in his or her activities, keeping in mind the local culture and traditions.

Communication Training for Extension Workers. A third function of the communicator in development programming is to provide communication training for all kinds of clientele. Virtually all the groups identified two types of communication training: (1) In-service training for field workers; and (2) Long-term training at institutions of higher learning for pre-professionals. Participants from Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe who attended the DSC for Southern Africa Project Planning Workshop, were unanimously agreed that journalism training was inappropriate for solving the communication problems they faced in educating farmers. They felt that Extension workers were equally ill-trained in communication and agreed that a new communication professional, more oriented toward development, such as DSC (or agricultural and health communication) was needed. The participants demanded that the DSC for Southern Africa project establish national DSC centers in each country. These centers should contain the expertise necessary to provide DSC advise and assistance to development programs and projects in the field, particularly, those needing help with involving people in participatory decision-making. The national DSC centers would also offer in-service training to officials at levels ranging from management to field workers. The participants also called for the establishment of a regional DSC degree program in one university in Southern Africa to serve the needs of the region as

a whole. They felt that in the interest of self-sufficiency, it was important for the region to develop its capacity to produce its own DSC professionals rather than to depend on outside sources.

The communication specialists in ACE also stressed the importance of communication training for field staff. One person noted: "I stress the training role here because I think far too often U.S. communications professionals are brought into a project to do a particular job, they do that job and then leave and the project personnel are not able to duplicate that task after the person has left because no transfer of skills took place." Another person had this compelling viewpoint:

We did not work directly with agricultural Extension services in the few countries that had them, and that, in my opinion, is the key area where communication skills from developed countries can play the most important role: helping Third World agencies prepare information in graphic forms that can be readily understood by illiterate farmers—such as instructional videos, films, and slide presentations, and simplified, well-illustrated printed materials, and getting these into the hands and minds of the farmers. This remains a major challenge facing communicators in rural development projects throughout the Third World, and until it is effectively achieved there will be only limited progress in agricultural development, in my opinion. Wonderful new technologies in the form of improved cultivators and farming methods have been and will continue to be

developed, but they will go for naught if farmers aren't persuaded to adopt them and helped to establish them.

As a part of the training function, the different groups noted that the communicator should also design instructional programs for local personnel in the effective use of media at their disposal. The communicator should also be able to encourage talented young people to consider careers in communication as a way of achieving national self-sustainability.

Production of Multimedia and Audiovisual Materials on a Cost-Recovery Basis. There was also overwhelming agreement that the fourth task of the communicator is to oversee the production and development of multimedia and audio-visual materials required by projects and programs. He or she must pretest all materials as they are developed with a representative sample of the target audience. The FAO consultation group noted that under the rubric of "message production," the communicator must be able to prepare messages in "understandable form, in manageable learning modules, using audio-visual tools that do not presume literacy for comprehension" (p. 3). Participants at the Southern Africa project planning meeting made an important note. They were agreed that development aid money soon runs out and the project must find ways of sustaining itself once the aid money is gone. They agreed that the national DSC centers should be ex-

pected to operate on a cost-recovery basis that it is hoped, could lead to ultimate self-sustaining independence. This cost-recovery strategy recognizes that the services that DSC can provide are endowed with a clearly definable capacity for income generation that begs exploitation. Nepal offers an example of a success story where the Multimedia Production Center (MPC) of the Agriculture Communication Division (ACD) of the Ministry of Agriculture is operating on a cost-recovery basis, operating its own Revolving Fund and charging development agencies, government agencies, and private businesses for services it renders them. To be competitive with private communication centers, the MPC has state-of-the-art equipment for radio, video, printing and publication, graphics, and computers (Khanal and Thapliya, 1992).

Promotion of Networking among Development Professionals. A fifth function of the communicator in development programming is to facilitate linkages among all people engaged in development work in the region, or district. Participants at the Southern African Project Planning Workshop noted that the director of the national DSC center should develop in-country linkages and networks as well as cooperate with his or her colleagues in other countries to develop regional, continental, and international networking of communication professionals in development. The national DSC centers also could serve as clearing houses of information by organizing an-

nual professional conferences and meetings for knowledge-sharing and, if possible, publish professional journals.

Communication Campaign Planning and Implementation
Communication Planning. A sixth function of the communicator, which is implicit in all the other functions, is that of a communication planner. He or she must define what needs to be done in terms of communication objectives (goals); overall communication needs, and training. The communicator must be seen as a "vital partner to the overall scope of the project," said one member of ACE. "Far too often communication is an afterthought that was not originally planned or budgeted for," added another ACE member. Communication planning, many ACE members indicated, includes the following: assessing available resources in terms of audiences (the means); deciding what can be done given resources; assessing the potential role of communication in a project; determining appropriate media and methods to help project-participants meet their goals and objectives, as determined through communication with project personnel; clarifying and explaining project goals to those outside the project; determination of the most cost-effective mix of media and methods for a given level of funding; and adopting a scientific approach to communication. Many respondents noted that many communicators in development projects today are technicians, such as technical editors, writers, broadcast-

ers, graphic designers, desktop publishing technicians, and cinematographers, not communication scientists, as envisaged in this study. As one ACE member appropriately stated:

Few among Third World nations have had either the professional [communication] education or experience to serve on equal terms with top project people. And not all the North American or European communication professionals we've seen abroad seem both capable and comfortable in tackling those functions. Many are willing to be a technical, rather than [a] professional communicator.

It would seem from the foregoing that one must differentiate between the communication technician (a/v specialist) and the "communication professional" (communication scientist). Some members in the study felt that a clear distinction needs to be made between the two communication professions by elaborating on the competencies and standards required of the professional communicator. But this must wait another study.

Summary and Conclusion

This study argued that if communication is to serve as the engine of development, or, as Rogers and Svenning (1969) noted, "the key that opens the door to change" (p. 7) then careful attention must be given to identifying the communicator functions in development projects and programs. This study has helped to advance knowledge

in this regard by showing what these communication functions are. They include communication planning, participation and mobilization of beneficiaries, training, networking, production of development messages, and advising governments and subject matter specialists about the importance of communication in development.

A basic conclusion to be drawn from the functions of the professional communicator in development programming is that he or she is a facilitator—someone who must do everything possible to ensure that the project succeeds. The challenge now is to get policymakers to recognize the communicator functions in development programming. However, an equally challenging task is to determine what training one needs to be a communication professional. Research needs to be carried out to determine this. However, the researcher believes that new multidisciplinary, graduate programs such as development support communication, agricultural communication, health communication, and environmental communication which are springing up in many universities in the United States and elsewhere, are aimed at producing this action-oriented professional.

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