

Essay 4

From: Alan Fowler & Kees Biekart (eds) (2008) *Civic Driven Change: Citizen's Imagination in Action*. The Hague: Institute of Social Studies. (see also: www.iss.nl/cdc)

Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron

Six degrees and butterflies ~ Communication, Citizenship, and Change

A development cycle is closing while the poverty gap is widening. At the centre of the debate are the struggles on what some still call *development* and others *transformative change*; where agency also has a two-fold meaning: agency as of agencies that promote the top-down development machinery, and the *agency*¹ of civic participation struggling to gain space in the decision-making process, where communication is essential.

Indicators on human development are nearly touching a moment of no return in terms of environmental degradation and poverty, caused by increasing inequality and concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer people.

We communicators working for social change have been saying for years that one of the main reasons why the classic understanding of 'development' is failing is because communication as a participatory process is not being part of it. We will further explain how communication is participation, something that many are reluctant to see. We believe that conceptualizing development without the active involvement of people deviates from its original intent and is unsustainable. And we argue that communication as dialogue and debate is at the core of civic involvement and social change.

Failures in development approaches can be explained. When analysing causes and effects, everything is related like in the Edward Lorenz poetic analogy: 'Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?'² or the popular Kevin Bacon game: there are less than six degrees of separation between communication/participation and policies, strategies, funding, expertise, and the implementation of development programmes, but planners do not see the relation.

Communication - a very different animal than information dissemination or institutional visibility - is generally absent, and so the equation leaves aside the main factors in the process of transformative and social

change: civic engagement, collective action, social movements, community organization...

We attempt to show in this essay, through reflection and case stories, that the whole approach to development and communication for development needs to change and be placed from the perspective of citizens. Only through effective civic engagement and the participation of communities in the decision-making process on programmes and projects that affect their lives, we will be able to change the hegemonic model, which has not proved to be effective in terms of reducing poverty and inequality.

Images from the cemetery of development

Definitions of 'development' are useless because what is relevant is their translation into practices that affect the real lives of people. What we see is what we get. Often the concept of 'development' is tied to infrastructure, to walls, cement, buildings. For example, what defines a school? Is it the brick walls and benches, or the students and the teacher? Rather than the empty schools and hospitals I have seen in Africa, I personally prefer the image of a school operating under the generous shadow of a large tree; a school without walls and benches, but with a teacher and students.

Anyone that works in development can collect stories that make good examples of what I call the cemetery of development. We could do many books telling the stories, a museum with the sad skeletons of the misdoings in the name of development, misdoings that many aid organizations struggle to hide in the closet. I usually take photos of broken bridges, rusty tractors abandoned on the side of the road with weed covering them. I have seen roads that do not reach anywhere, brand new video equipment in the backyards of government institutions that didn't know what to do with it, and water pumps that do not provide water anymore but still proudly show a plate with the year of installation and the name of the international agency that donated it. I've seen beautiful schools and hospitals,

with the needed equipment, but no doctors, no teachers, no nurses. What is the point of building structures that are meant to remain empty?

We could list all these candidates and give away the 'golden razzies' awards to the worst examples.³ People and communities - the so called 'beneficiaries' - should be at the panel of judges. They should say what they think and ask why they were never consulted in the first place.

But I've also seen the opposite, civic engagement that mobilizes entire communities because they are certain that their participation is the only sustainable means of development. I have seen Dalit women in India, poor and illiterate, marginalized by the system of castes, the economic system of power and the superstructure of social prejudices, taking in their own hands the task of making their voices be heard through the use of video or radio tools.

Already in the 1960s, French sociologist, agronomist and politician Rene Dumont (1962, 1969) criticized the tendency to privilege infrastructure instead of people and the mean impact of mega developments on the environment. His warnings on African countries, as well as Bangladesh on Cuba unfortunately became obvious examples of what exactly not to do in developing countries. However, those in charge of policy making couldn't care less about warnings. The typical example is the US administration ignoring the Kyoto Protocol and betting on ethanol made of maize that is already being taken away from millions of people for whom this is the basic staple. Were they ever consulted about how 'green' they want the energy to be in US cars?

'Development', as we've known it for the past fifty years, has many bad names. Noam Chomsky (2005) calls it 'unsustainable non-development', and Eduardo Galeano (2001) doesn't save words to categorize the international financial system that is responsible for the development model prevailing today: 'The world economy is the most efficient expression of organized crime. The international bodies that control currency, trade, and credit, practice international terrorism against poor countries, and against the poor of all countries, with a cold-blooded professionalism that would make the best of the bomb throwers blush.'

What is certain is that much more is needed than deadlines and politically-correct wording in UN corridors. Action is needed that leaves room for people to participate. Self-organization of citizens to participate in the decision-making process is essential, because citizens are subjects of change, and not just objects for the trial of experimental economic and social policies. 'Development' is meaningless without civic involvement that leads to transformative social change. The word has been emptied of its original meaning, distorted, manipulated, exhausted by misuses.

Policies: power, profit, propaganda & privileges

My colleague Louie Tabbig, vigorous promoter of community radio in The Philippines, says that alternative and participatory communication raises against the 'four P' that are hegemonic in mass media: power, profit, propaganda and privileges.⁴ These 'four P' actually apply to development in general and the way information and/or communication are conceived by those that make the decisions on policies and strategies for development.

We can synthesize 'development' in images as those from the 'cemetery of development' above; however, if we had to use a simple graphic to symbolize it, it would be a vertical top-down arrow, which at the same time denotes a *modus operandi* and the tendency to fail. In spite of all the apparent changes in the jargon of development, the predominant model has not changed: it is vertical. Decisions are made at the top of donor and aid organizations, at the top of governments, at the top of international NGOs.

Institutional 'culture' is one of the reasons for top-down approaches. Institutions are per se vertical structures, not consultative bodies. They respond to agendas that have been already established without consultation with citizens, the so-called 'beneficiaries'. These agendas set principles and priorities that are usually global and do not take into consideration the plurality and multicultural context of our rich human world. The vertical application of the agendas is one of the causes for so much distortion; which is why the question 'whose priorities' always comes to our minds, particularly when we see on the ground the absurdity of globalizing agendas.

Take a short example of what I have seen while working in Papua New Guinea (PNG) for AusAID⁵ in 2001-02. The largest budget for a health programme was dedicated to HIV/AIDS, whereas this is only the 22nd cause of morbidity and mortality in PNG. Those on top of the killers' list, such as tuberculosis or malaria, did not receive as much funding or attention from the international community. I remember the preparation of the AIDS world day would entail three months of intensive work, postponing or sacrificing all other activities, just because it was considered so important to have a series of posters and T-shirts printed, a public demonstration and a photo op activity where the president or the minister of health would endorse the programme. Typically, the posters are ready only hours before 'D' day, so they are ill-distributed *after* the occasion, and then, silence for the next 9 months, until the new preparations start.⁶

Institutional culture seems to be solidly established on three pillars: red tape, secrecy and parcelling power; whereas the pillars of democracy are participation, transparency and sharing knowledge and power with others. Ironically, it is in the best interest of states and also donor institutions to invest in programmes that are sustainable, meaning, those where ownership is assumed by organized citizens and communities through participatory and inclusive processes. Then, why doesn't it happen?

Sharing state responsibilities with citizens is the best way to ensure transformative social action that benefits the poorest of the poor and takes the whole society forward. In spite of this very understandable approach, states are reluctant to acknowledge it through their actions, and instead play the anachronism of disempowering civic participation, the opposite of strengthening the notion of citizenship that is related to fundamental human rights. States are certainly also the subject of pressure from the international financial system to apply measures, such as privatization, that affects the social fabric and erodes the public space by weakening civic participation. Citizens are equal before the law, but the law is not applied equally to all citizens, because its interpretation is mediated by exclusion and discrimination because of race, gender, language or social status. Thus, these forms of segregation undermine civic engagement for transformative change and inclusive development.

Often national states have manipulated citizen-inspired principles and community development efforts to turn them into prescriptive tools. Communication has been used with partisan objectives, masked under a discourse about freedom of expression. The pattern of political control has in many cases shaped a mock of civic engagement through massive mobilizations where citizens enact a script written by someone else.

If there are no clear communication policies, and strategies, there is no parameter for establishing any organization's coherent practices in developing countries. As amazing as it may sound, very few multilateral and bilateral agencies, very few government development agencies and very few international and local NGOs actually have a communication policy; it simply does not exist and the exceptions only confirm the rule. Further in this essay, the case story in Mozambique shows how development organizations and international aid agencies can be held hostage by individuals that have been endowed of excessive power.

Participation/communication in development means that power will be shared although people who are used to give orders do not easily accept it. This is why bureaucrats in high levels often prefer 'business as usual': instead of communication that cares about people they typically choose institutional promotion and propaganda. If a different approach to communication and social change had been implemented in HIV/AIDS programmes, we wouldn't be seeing the poor results we see worldwide. The strategies to combat HIV/AIDS in different countries clearly show that participation/communication have more chances of being successful. The comparative cases of South Africa and Brazil, two countries that have similar population indicators (but Brazil had twice as many HIV/AIDS cases than South Africa in 1990s), should bring about lessons on what works and what does not.⁷

No matter what efforts we make to facilitate processes of communication where people and poor communities are at the centre, nothing will change if there is no political will and real commitment from those that make the

final decisions. But above all, nothing will change anyway if civic involvement is not also translated into collective action.

A case story of unexpected outcome

This case story concerns a facilitated process with an unexpected outcome, and is one that throws into stark relief the challenges associated with learning and social change. It is a powerful tale because it is deeply personal, and also highlights the way that power wielded by individuals may derail a participatory process of civic involvement seen as successful by the majority of those individuals and organizations.

In 2003 I was called in to Mozambique by the National AIDS Council to design a national communication strategy on HIV/AIDS, an activity funded by UNICEF. Before accepting I said I was interested in taking the responsibility if I had the green light to facilitate a participatory process. This was accepted by Janet Mondlane,⁸ head of the National AIDS Council, as well as by Marie Pierre Poirier, the UNICEF Representative.⁹

The context for facilitating a participatory process for civic involvement and social change was positive. Numerous organizations are active with HIV/AIDS in Mozambique. The National AIDS Council, in collaboration with national NGOs, other government agencies and ministries, and the international cooperation, facilitated the establishment of SAIDAS, a network of more than forty organizations involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Member organizations recognized the importance of communication and participation in support of the National Strategic Plan; however they acknowledged the lack of specialized expertise to develop a comprehensive communication strategy with medium and long-term vision. Communication had been used in a random and improvised manner by the vast majority of government institutions and organizations of the civil society involved in HIV/AIDS programmes and projects. The details on how the process evolved are relevant.

The participatory process I facilitated involved all the organizations of SAIDAS and some that had not been involved yet. The first task was to establish a diagnostic of problems and needs, which we did through a 'Communication Strategy Workshop' with representatives from civil society organizations, government and international agencies, including People Living with AIDS (PLWA). We reviewed experiences and lessons learned in working with communication and information tools for HIV/AIDS, and discussed problems and challenges that should be incorporated into the national communication strategy.

Three provincial workshops were organized with a similar methodology and format to involve the provinces of the North, Centre and South of Mozambique. The recommendations of the provincial workshops endorsed the outputs of the first national workshop: a fresh approach to communication was needed, less dependent on mass media, more specific to communities. The inputs from the

4 national and regional workshops were essential to draft the Communication and Information Strategy that included both communication and information components, and taking into account the already existing communication potential in Mozambique, such as community radio, traditions and cultural expressions, which were formerly seen as barriers, not as opportunities.

The strategy draft included components addressing communication and information needs; representing an integral and multi-prong approach to involve various sectors of society, the most affected by the epidemic as well as those that had a social and technical responsibility. The communication component (peer communicators, community mobilization, provincial networking) responded to the need of taking the discussion on HIV/AIDS to the communities, particularly to urban and rural settings in the most affected provinces. The approach was essentially participatory, involving all stakeholders and local leadership. It aimed to promote a diversity of communication processes that would lead to social change, through culture and tradition, using local languages and strengthening local forms of communication, some traditional such as music, dance and theatre, and some modern such as community radio and the Internet. Meanwhile, the information component (national awareness, international commitment) met the demand of greater information on HIV/AIDS for decision makers and for the institutions of civil society. Although it was clear that mass media had limited influence in Mozambique, particularly in rural areas, the purpose of the strategy was to strengthen the existing channels by supporting the work of journalists.

By the end of 2003 the draft was distributed to all stakeholders and a 'Strategy Validation Workshop' in Maputo gave an opportunity to organizations to review the final draft. Some items changed at the request of participants, but overall the communication strategy was validated by the collective. The process had been a good example on how to build a communication strategy through civic participation and dialogue. To my knowledge no other national communication strategy for HIV/AIDS has been designed through a comprehensive participatory and inclusive process.

Ironically, the Mozambican organizations participating in the effort did not anticipate that their communication strategy was going to face another challenge. For reasons that are still unclear, UNICEF Representative in Mozambique, Marie-Pierre Poirier, vetoed the strategy. No official explanation was ever provided but my guess is that a mix of political and personal decisions motivated UNICEF to archive the strategy. The UNICEF Representative had a peculiar understanding of communication; she valued media-based public relations activities rather than inclusive and participatory communication processes that take longer to achieve results. UNICEF institutional visibility within a short period of time was her main interest; she needed the visibility because she was applying for a much higher position as UNICEF Representative in Brazil, which she eventually got.

This case story has a tail with a sting. I tried hard to put pressure on UNICEF Mozambique for a rational explanation and never got one. I even suggested UNICEF to invite a neutral international panel of development communication specialists, to review the strategy and provide their qualified opinion. Since my email messages were ignored during months, I copied them to those that had actively been involved in the participatory exercise, and to colleagues in other countries. UNICEF was increasingly irritated and didn't succeed when trying to get the Mozambican member organizations of SAIDAS to sign a letter discrediting the strategy and the facilitator. At some point I even got an email from UNICEF Executive Director, Carol Bellamy - a very weird honour - with a gentle threat: 'please stop sending these messages, you are not helping your cause'. At the beginning I didn't understand very well her message, but then I knew: my own office received pressures from UNICEF New York so I would stop and shut up.

The Mozambican tale of participation versus power shows how much individual and personal interests influence the decision-making process in development programmes. A participatory strategy can be a threat to the power that is used in a discretionary manner, since UN agency in-country representatives often consider themselves as kings (or 'queens' in this case).

Labels for sale: this is not a pipe

Misunderstanding *communication* is as dangerous as misunderstanding *development*; both are at the core of fifty years of failures in a perspective of human development that is inclusive and brings justice and democracy to all.

The issue of labels and concepts in relation to communication and social change is almost surrealistic, like in Magritte's painting '*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*'¹⁰ that I have used in the heading of the section: the object is clearly there, right in the centre, but the title seems to contradict the eyes that can see it. But of course, Magritte is right: his artwork is only the image of the pipe, not the actual pipe.

There are flabbergasting confusions on how we use words to name the matters and tools of our work in communication. Even colleague communicators and journalists (I am actually both, active and practicing journalism since the late 1960s and communication since the mid-1970s) enthusiastically promote the confusion, and many academics are not helping at all, deepening the misunderstanding.

Words, words, words: a multiple case story

Polonius would be killed again, but this time intentionally if Hamlet was a communicator today. Words are important in communication, never mind if the wind takes them away and if they are no more valuable than the paper they've been written on.

Many have forgotten the etymology of *communication*, thus they go on equalling mass media to communication,

which is in fact *information* not communication (some would even argue that mass media contributes to misinformation). From Greek and Latin, 'communication' means sharing and participation; it is the act of putting in common through dialogue. However many still use the word to label information power houses and vertical flows of information. As far back as 1963, when theories of development communication were in diapers, Venezuelan philosopher and scholar, Antonio Pasquali, wrote:

"The expression "mass communications media" contains a flagrant contradiction in terms and should be banished. Either we are in the presence of means used for communication, in which case the receiving pole is never a "mass", or we are in the presence of the same means used for information, in which case it is redundant to specify "mass".¹¹

The simplest way to explain the difference is: information is 'one-way'; communication is 'two-ways'... But there is more to it of course, which goes back to the very basic 'sender-receiver' theories of the sixties. Notwithstanding all the cute charts, arrow-flows and catchy acronyms that have been invented mainly by US universities to represent and name 'step-by-step' and 'how-to-do-it' communication manuals, which actually promote more of the same: mass media information dissemination or social marketing. Information dissemination is closer to institutional visibility than to sharing knowledge and values. Confusing both has become a common place in the jargon of aid agencies working in development.

Mass media in the hands of powerful private interests or centralist autocratic governments do not help citizens' voices to be heard, nor do they support social movements and civic participation for social change. Mass media will only act upon economic and political interests, remaining silent on major issues that concern the majority of people. No less than Ignacio Ramonet (2003), the Director of *Le Monde Diplomatique* has been campaigning for a 'fifth power', citizens' communication, to counter-balance the 'fourth power', colluded with economic and political agendas of the powerful.

The hierarchic mass media model has been in place too long, not just within the power struggles over the development chessboard, but also in the minds of those that study communication (or, should I say, information), in spite of very clear differences between the hierarchic model and the participatory 'approach' (which is not and can never be a rigid 'model'). Information dissemination, as used in development, reproduces the same key features that are at its origin: the main lessons were learned during World War II, when scholars contributed to the propaganda efforts of the United States government. After the war, these lessons were promptly applied to commercial marketing in support of the conversion of war industry in times of peace (tractors instead of tanks). When the new chess board was drawn over the Third World, the same 'tactics' and 'strategies' learned during the war were applied to development communication.

It is not a mere coincidence that some still use in health or education programmes the words that emerged from the propaganda jargon during the war, such as 'tactics' and 'campaign' or from the later marketing adaptations, such as 'client' and 'user'.

If the confusion between information and communication is already a grey zone that needs to be constantly clarified, something similar happens with 'communications' and 'communication'. Many would use both words at random, without stopping for a minute to think why one has an 's' and the other one does not. Et *pourtant* the distinction is right there in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, where the plural is defined as 'a system (as of telephones) for communicating' and 'a *system* of routes for moving troops, supplies, and vehicles'; whereas the singular is defined as 'a *process* by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour'.¹²

For those that are not ideologically deaf (different from being physically hearing-impaired) it is easy to establish differences between a model that is vertical, that looks for behavioural causes to poverty, that focuses on individual changes, that aims to persuade, that bets on passive 'banking education',¹³ that considers people as passive receivers of information, as users of services and objects of change, and implements costly mass media campaigns that rely on messages and general assumptions. On the other hand, communication is about revealing the structural causes of poverty through the voices of the poor, it aims to be horizontal and to 'conscientizar'¹⁴ rather than persuade; aiming to social change through active civic involvement and collective participatory action - critical, analytical, dialogic and debatable - of those considered agents of change and subjects of development.

No less important is the confusing use of 'knowledge', as in 'transferring knowledge to the poor'... On the one hand, I am bothered by this bygone idea that poor communities - or developing countries by extension - do not have knowledge of their own, which is obviously an obtuse way of thinking. On the other hand, and no less worrying, is the idea that knowledge can be generated in one place and 'sent' to another place.

Again, this is the typical banking concept of education that Freire strongly denounced. Knowledge is seen either as a privilege of some 'developed' societies or a package that can be transferred. In reality, it is information that is shared and incorporated in the process of locally generating knowledge. The knowledge creation process is dynamic: individuals and communities start with the knowledge they already have, and put it in dialogue with the information they receive from other sources. This is actually cultural interaction, and explains why cultures are not closed compartments, but living bodies of knowledge and experience that are constantly going under evolution and social transformation.

6 Other communication for another development

People need to tell their own stories, as much as they need to decide about their model of social change. It makes sense to work in the direction of new narratives related to civic-driven change; the stories and narratives of citizens' participation for transformative change are the superstructure of human development which places culture and identity as key factors. Thus, we need to ensure that such stories are originated as part of the right to communicate that all communities have, and that they are owned by those who could use them for advancing their collective aspirations.

Although the expansion of press freedom has contributed to opening up political spaces and promoting accountability, the concept is now partially outdated and needs to be replaced or at least complemented by a concept that is closer to civic engagement and participation: the right to communicate. 'Free press' is still a relatively young phenomenon in Africa and Asia, where only in recent years national states released their stronghold on mass media authorizing private media. The enthusiasm that this generated and the mushrooming of commercial media outlets at all levels may find a bumping road in years ahead, as we experienced in Latin America.

Our region opened up to private media several decades ago; television being the last to be privatized during the 1980s. Ironically by the time the UNESCO MacBride report (1980) came out establishing the fact that the world was living under enormous imbalances of information flows controlled by the US and Europe and recommending national states and regions to develop public media, the privatization trend was already leaving into private hands the little public media that existed. Promoters of privatization would argue, as usual, that the state was a terrible manager; that the quality of public media was very low, and that private media could afford to bring the diversity of contents that was missing. However, when we do a balance of what has happened since, we are likely to yearn for the good old public media, which at least had educational and cultural content and paid attention to indigenous issues as no private mass media has done since in our countries.

The expressions 'freedom of expression' and the 'right to communicate' have become almost antagonistic. 'Freedom of expression' - as Antonio Pasquali emphasizes - 'is an ironic *contradictio in adjecto*, since it refers only to the freedom of the informer'. Almost three decades have past since UNESCO promoted information rights, today the debate in the most important world forums, such as the World Congress of Communication for Development (Rome, October 2006) is around communication rights.

The right to communicate is a basic human right. It is the right of citizens not only to access information but to produce it. The distinction between 'access' and 'participation' is not a minor one. Access is ultimately the ceiling for information, whereas participation is the starting point for the right to communicate. There is a thick line divid-

ing access to information from participation in the communication process: access allows citizens to receive information to which they are entitled to fulfil their demands for transparency and accountability of government and private institutions.

Participation in the communication process is a radically different ball game, because it entails collective civic engagement with media in a way that decisions are taken by people. The thick line is thus the decision-making process divide. Who makes the decisions on programming, on staffing, on policies and strategies, is what defines if access is the limit or participation is the starting point.

The barriers for access, even more draconian in contexts of authoritarian governments or high concentration of media ownership, explain the mushrooming of alternative, community or citizens' media. Various names are used to refer to media that is in the hands of civic and social movements, but other than labelling it the essential is to explain how it works.

Case story: the voices from the mine

The miners' radio stations in my own country, Bolivia are a paradigmatic example. I have written extensively on them and there is abundant material on the web, so I will limit myself to the most salient features of the experience.¹⁵

Poor miners working in Bolivian mines organized themselves during the late 1940s to fund one of the first community radio stations in the world. Typically, *Radio Sutatenza* in Colombia is said to be the first one, because it started in 1947 whereas the first miners' radio station of Bolivia started a couple of years later. However, *Radio Sutatenza* was a project of a young priest committed with the village where he had been posted, whereas the first radio station that was created in the mining district of Catavi, North of Potosi (Bolivia) was set up by workers from the tin mines. Only a couple of years after initiating his innovative experience in Sutatenza, Father José Joaquín Salcedo changed the cap of the station and joined ACPO, the network of educational radio of Colombia, where contents were centrally prepared and community participation was limited to access.

The miners' radio stations continued to develop and multiply along the 1950s and 1960s, in spite of the military repression that started in 1964 throughout various military governments. During the Ché guerrilla in Bolivia, in June 1967, the army violently occupied the mining district of Siglo XX and Catavi, killing several union leaders and attacking *La Voz del Minero*, one of the radio stations. This was not the first time and it wouldn't be the last. Miners' radio stations became a customary target for the army because they were the voice of the forefront social organizations in Bolivia, capable of mobilizing not only the workers of the mines but the whole Bolivian society.

The beauty about miners' radio stations experience is that they are truly the result of social movements engag-

ing in communication processes that contribute to the strengthening of their organizations; civic participation at its most, in defence of the right to communicate but also the right to decide on transformative social change. Miners' radio stations are among the very few examples of community media where the community itself contributes to the social, institutional and financial sustainability. Social sustainability has never been so crystal clear anywhere else, since from the very inception of these stations it is the miners themselves that facilitated the communication process. Institutional sustainability was guaranteed by miners' unions, which allowed the station to have a place to function and provided legal coverage under union legislation. Finally, financial sustainability was mainly ensured by the miners themselves, donating one day of their monthly salaries to sustain the stations. Only visiting the mining camps and knowing how miners live can one possibly understand the real meaning of donating a percentage of a very poor salary.

There are similarities with community-based communication experiences in other regions of the world, where civic participation is at the core, even if the origin of these citizens' media outlets may not be linked to large social movements. In Nepal, a group of progressive journalists associated in NEFEJ, a forum for environmental journalists, created *Radio Sagarmatha* in 1997, the first independent radio station, which has been instrumental in the struggle for democracy and a lead for the more recent community radio stations that have grown in the country. *Bush Radio* in South Africa operated underground during the apartheid before it got its formal licence in 1995.

There are more than ten thousand community-based radio stations in Latin America alone and each one has an interesting story on achieving the right to communicate. And radio is not the only example when it comes to social movements taking in their own hands the right to participate in the decision-making process that affects their lives, by means of engaging civic participation with communication processes that lead to social change.

Communicators as strategists

We could paraphrase the axiom by Clemenceau: 'War is too important a matter to be left to the military' and say 'communication is too important to be left in the hands of journalists'. Or did Clemenceau say: '(...) too important to be left to the generals'? In that case, we could paraphrase: 'communication is too important a matter to be left to development planners' because they make the decisions on communication issues, without knowing much about it.

As a communicator, it often strikes me how *anyone* thinks he or she is a communication specialist. I have seen too many communication posts in large development organizations filled by people that have a vague idea about communication, have never been involved in actual communication experiences or have reflected/written/published about the field.

I haven't seen any other specialized field of work so tainted with improvisation (the bad one, not the creative and innovative improvisation). Decisions on communication in large development agencies are made by people without the appropriate background and often without any field experience that could balance the lack of studies. I am still undecided if it is worse to have a higher-level bureaucrat that makes decisions on communication without the necessary knowledge or a journalist in lower levels of the organization who only receives instructions, makes no decisions and does only petty work. The truth is that both are usually present in development organizations that pride themselves of being 'communication-conscious'. This is the usual design: the communication person (generally a journalist) is hired in lower positions but the policy and strategic decisions are made by managers who can be doctors, engineers, or just plain bureaucrats.

The above has consequences in how communication is perceived in development programmes and projects, usually only as information dissemination or institutional visibility. The staff attached to communication areas spend their time preparing press conferences, ensuring that colleagues from mass media do broadcast or write stories on the good work the organization does, or dealing with advertising agencies and printer shops to get the jingles, banners or posters in time for the next mass media campaign. Orders come from above and too often the 'communication' section or department is no more than a public relations office for the director.

We have already seen above that information dissemination is not communication and that journalists are not communicators. As a practising journalist and a communicator I have learned to separate both and appreciate their differences. Because of our work with news, immediacy, messages and mass media, we journalists do not have a strategic view on reality. Moreover, we work in media houses that have too many rules (read: censorship and self-censorship) and guided by an acute sense of 'opportunity' (both related to the span of interest of news and the political environment).

The profile of a communicator is different. Consistent with the roots of the word 'communication', a communicator is a facilitator of dialogue and participation. He or she enables processes of communication that may involve the production and dissemination of messages, notwithstanding that the most important is the process itself. A communicator has his feet on the ground, meaning he/she is deeply involved with transformative change. The most important feature in the profile of a communicator is the capacity to deal strategically with issues and plan communication activities accordingly.

If we agree that communication is equal to participation, then a communicator is a promoter of participation leading to civic change. The challenges of communication are constantly evolving as new possibilities and 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 community organizations to covering social issues for citizens' media outlets, devising participation strategies for development projects at the community level, facilitating the networking of non-governmental organizations, and/or producing educational materials. This flexibility to use communication strategies in various cultural contexts provides a training that is second to none. Communicators can articulate and link the narratives of civic-driven change with the political project of civic movements, thus contributing to strengthening their voices.

The new communicator must deeply understand that communication for social change deals essentially with culture. A special sensitivity is needed to support the process of social change communities and social movements that have nothing else to hold on to than their cultural identity. Development and social change must be possible within a process of horizontal and respectful cultural exchanges.¹⁶

It may sound provoking to say that this profile of communicator does not yet exist; however, reality shows that there are so few that their existence is barely acknowledged. When discussing with programme managers of development agencies or NGOs I usually get this challenging reply: 'Even if we acknowledge your concept on communication for social change, where would we turn to find the appropriate communicator, the one you just described?' This directs to another important issue: very few academic institutions in the whole world are training communicators, whereas hundreds are pumping out journalists into the already constricted urban media job market.

This may change with new networks and organizations supportive of changes in the curricula of academic institutions. The Communication for Social Change Consortium facilitates a network of twenty universities in the world that offer a degree (masters or specialization) with an emphasis on communication for development and social change, and is supporting one university in each region. *OurMedia* is another important example; this is the only international network gathering hundreds of scholar activists, academics and practitioners seeking for changes in the way communication is taught and practised.

Most communicators are 'self-made' they started in other disciplines and slowly evolved through action to become communicators. Their background is typically varied, though many have something in common: they have worked with poor communities in rural or urban areas or with social movements, and felt at some point in their lives that they needed to use communication as a process of strengthening local organizations through dialogue.

The bottom line question is: do donor agencies and development organizations really want to take in the profile of a communicator? Although ultimately, the question is irrelevant: the profile of a communicator as a facilitator

of civic change is needed anyway. So, if not housed in development organizations, he/she should be involved in processes of change with social and civic movements, with community and citizen's media. His/her role is helping to think afresh about the potential of transformative civic action and social change.

A watchdog observatory

A panoptic view on communication approaches to development is needed at all levels of organizations intervening in the process of transformative change. This includes large donor and aid organizations as well as governments, NGOs and social movements.

Many of the transformative changes are happening at the level of small communities that either have gathered enough strength to take forward their own platform, or because they are too small to merit attention. Small may be beautiful,¹⁷ but it needs to connect and add to hundreds of similar experiences to make a difference for the whole society. It also needs to share the stories of civic engagement that can encourage others to act. There is a cruel paradox when 'small' is looked from above by large development players: they do not see the beauty of it, they don't see anything at all in fact. Only when 'smalls' of all horizons get together and gain representation do the big players listen to them.

Recently the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DfID) decided, at the highest level, to drop Latin America. All offices were closed, the staff was dispersed, and the programmes with local partners were abandoned. These were programmes that helped local organizations in Bolivia, Peru and Nicaragua to plan innovative initiatives in economic, social and political contexts. Evaluations by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) revealed that what DfID partners throughout the region valued most was not DfID funding, but the close working relationship with dynamic and innovative staff that was ready to support dialogue and jump into projects and initiatives that other cooperation agencies would not dare to touch because they were considered too political. The good marks for DfID included its flexibility to deal with proposals, the understanding that DfID staff had of the local context, the reduction of red tape and bureaucracy to the minimum possible... But DfID claims that it will be making available more funding than before through... the World Bank in Washington.

Stories like the above have much to do with the increasing concern about the lack of real commitment of large players with transformative change, which we have seen above as examples of short-sighted political willingness to change the world for better. In spite of the politically correct discourse about participatory development and the importance of communication that empowers, the trend is actually going in the opposite direction. Example: the World Bank, The Communication Initiative and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) organized the World Congress of Communication for

Development (WCCD) in Rome, in October 2006. It was a good congress since it managed to put in direct dialogue organizations of all sorts with a common interest: communication for civic and social change. Two thousand people representing a diversity of perspectives, from all regions of the world could not be wrong. The documents issued by the Congress are relevant to this discussion. However, the big irony is that only a couple of months after the Congress, the FAO 'restructured' (downgraded) the department in charge of communication for development. The FAO has in fact downgraded communication for development several times, first when Colin Fraser retired, then when Silvia Balit retired. It just shows their level of current commitment, quite different from what the FAO was known for during the 1970s.

In spite of these sad developments, the 'Rome Consensus' - agreed at the end of the WCCD - is a milestone:¹⁸

1. Overall national development policies should include specific Communication for Development components;
2. Development organizations should include Communication for Development as a central element at the inception of programmes;
3. Strengthen the Communication for Development capacity within countries and organizations at all levels. This includes people in their communities, Communication for Development specialists, and other staff, including through the further development of training courses and academic programmes;
4. Expand the level of financial investment to ensure adequate, coordinated financing of the core elements of Communication for Development as outlined under Strategic Requirements above. This includes budget line[s] for development communication;
5. Adopt and implement policies and legislation that provide an enabling environment for Communication for Development - including free and pluralistic media and the right to information and to communicate;
6. Development communication programmes should be required to identify and include appropriate monitoring and evaluation indicators and methodologies throughout the process;
7. Strengthen partnerships and networks at international, national, and local levels to advance Communication for Development and improve development outcomes;
8. Move towards a rights-based approach to Communication for Development.

Some of the key issues that we struggled for, during several years, were highlighted in the document although watered down with diplomatic jargon. We can fish them out again and wipe the weeds to look at them more clearly.

First, 'national development policies' should specifically include communication for development as a key component; second, all programmes and projects should be developed *from their inception* with communication as

a central element (hopefully strategic communication supporting civic engagement and not the usual shopping list of posters, jingles and banners); third, strengthening the 'communication capacity' in countries, at all levels. The fourth item was watered down to 'ensure adequate, coordinated financing of the core elements' (during the sessions we had discussed a stronger statement: organizations should allocate a minimum of 5 to 10 per cent of the total budget of each programme or project to communication for development and social change, apart from the budget for information and public relations).

The main issues were raised: clear policies and strategies, adequate budgets, and the need for specialized staff at high levels... But will anything real happen? How many documents in a nice glossy publication end on shelves?

What the WCCD did not specifically address in the final Consensus, but had been part of the discussion in groups, is that similar recommendations should have been addressed to social movements and civil society organizations who often engage with approaches to communication that are not consistent with the nature of participation, civic engagement and transformative change.

This brings back to the title of this section and an important theme: we need to make governments, cooperation agencies, donors, NGOs and even social movements accountable for their approaches to communication.

Accountability is one of those buzz words generally used to put national governments against the wall. Seldom anybody discusses accountability in a broader perspective, including the private sector. The private sector has as much responsibility on development as the national states, so accountability and transparency should also apply to them. More importantly, reducing accountability to balancing accounts does not really help in terms of promoting transformative change.

We need to establish international observatories that can monitor and analyse the commitment of international development organizations, as well as national governments and the private sector, with participatory approaches, civic engagement and communication for social change. Similar observatories exist in Latin America and Asia, but are restricted to mass media, not to communication. They usually study the attention given by mass media to various national themes, and how the coverage is done in terms of representation. These media observatories have grown out of the failure of other bland forms of monitoring mass media houses, such as the individuals attached to a particular media with the task of receiving complains and forwarding them to administrative authorities.

If mass media, generally so powerful, is under the scrutiny of watchdog organizations made of respectable citizens and academics, why not imagine something similar for communication in transformative and social change?

Observatories watching closely the large financial institutions also exist, such as the Bretton Woods project which follows every step of the World Bank and other

10 financial institutions, even though their focus is on policy and high level politics.

For a start, these observatories on communication for transformative change and civic inclusion should be measured over a simple triad of verifications:

- a) Has the organization developed a communication policy and strategy?
- b) Does the organization have staff working at high levels where decisions are made?
- c) Has the organization allocated a fixed 5 to 10 per cent of the general budget of a project for communication activities?

The above three questions will provide a profile of the organization and its real and measurable commitment to communication that engages with citizens and civic change.

Notes

¹ As in Amartya Sen (1999) who uses the term 'agent' as 'someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well'.

² This was the title of the academic paper on predictability that Edward Lorenz, meteorologist and father of the chaos theory, presented in 1972.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Raspberry_Award

⁴ I reported this conversation in a chapter on the Tambuli Radio Network in my book *Making Waves: Participatory Communication for Social Change* (2001).

⁵ Australian Government Overseas Aid Program.

⁶ I've written on these infamous 'International Days': http://www.comminit.com/drum_beat_238.html

⁷ Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton (2007).

⁸ The widow of FRELIMO founder and combatant Eduardo Mondlane, who was assassinated in 1969.

⁹ The tale itself will show why individuals' names are relevant. Not naming them would leave a gray zone where it is not clear 'who-dunit', and using fake names would only confuse the reader and attribute virtues or wrong-doings to those that do not deserve either.

¹⁰ 'This is not a pipe'.

¹¹ Antonio Pasquali's seminal text on communication theory was only translated in English in 2006, in *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings* by Gumucio Dagron, Alfonso and Thomas Tufte (eds).

¹² See: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communication>. The emphasis on the word 'process' is ours.

¹³ As in Paulo Freire's books.

¹⁴ Again, good old (and always young) Paulo Freire.

¹⁵ See Gumucio-Dagron (1989). Apart from the book I wrote with Lupe Cajías, and the international seminar we organized at CIMCA - the NGO I founded and directed from 1984 to 1990 - I also co-directed with Eduardo Barrios the documentary film 'The Voice of the Mines' (1983) produced by UNESCO, and published dozens of short essays and articles.

¹⁶ See Gumucio-Dagron (1998).

¹⁷ A reference to E.F. Schumacher's book: *Small is beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973).

¹⁸ 'Communication for Development - A Major Pillar for Development and Change', it includes recommendations addressed to policy makers and funders.

References

Chomsky, Noam (2000) 'Unsustainable Non-Development'. <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2000/416/23042> (Posted 16 August 2000).

Dumont, René (1962) *LAfrique noire est mal partie (False start in Africa)*. New York: Praeger.

Dumont, René (1969) *Nous allons à la famine (The hungry future)*. New York: Praeger.

Galeano, Eduardo (2001) *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World*. New York: Picador.

Gumucio Dagron, Alfonso (1998) 'The New Communicator'. Paper originally written for a working meeting conveyed by The Rockefeller Foundation in Washington DC. Published online on 9 August 2002 at The Communication Initiative: <http://www.comminit.com/en/node/1890>

Gumucio Dagron, Alfonso (2001) *Making Waves: Participatory Communication for Social Change*. New York: The Rockefeller Foundation.

Gumucio Dagron, Alfonso and L. Cajías (eds) (1989) *Las radios mineras de Bolivia*. La Paz: CIMCA/UNESCO.

Gumucio Dagron, Alfonso and T. Tufte (eds) (2006) *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. New Jersey: Communication for Social Change Consortium.

O'Connor, Alan (ed.) (2004) *Community Radio in Bolivia. The Miners' Radio Stations*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Pasquali, Antonio (1963) 'Teoría de la comunicación: las implicaciones sociológicas entre información y cultura de masas. Definiciones', in *Comunicación y Cultura de Masas*. Caracas: Monte Avila Editores.

Ramonet, Ignacio (2003) 'El quinto poder', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, no 52, October.

Sachs, Jeffrey (2005) 'The Time for Action'. http://www.oecd.org/document/37/0,2340,en_2649_33721_35320997_1_1_1_1,00.html

Sen, Amartya (1999) *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

UNESCO (1980) *Many Voices, One World*. (The McBride report) Paris:UNESCO.

Westley, Frances, B. Zimmerman and M. Quinn Patton (2007) *Getting to maybe: how the world is changed*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

World Congress on Communication for Development (WCCD) (2006) 'The Rome Consensus', Rome, October.