

# Module 2 Unit 4

This is a **REQUIRED READING**.

Gumucio-Dagron, A., (2007). Playing with fire. CFSC/MAZI articles. Retrieved from <http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/mazi-articles.php?id=354>. [7 p.]

Gumucio-Dagron, A. (2007) *Playing with fire*. Mazi 13. Retrieved from <http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/mazi-articles.php?id=354> (7 p.)

## **Playing With Fire by Alfonso Gumucio Dagron**

Focusing on the politics of development communication is playing with fire again: This is not the first time it is being discussed. Development communication has been around since the early 1970s. Nevertheless, it is ironically still considered a nuisance by many of the large development players; it makes them uncomfortable.

Trying to explain communication for development and social change to decision makers involves simplifying some larger issues for them to understand the shorthand. However, even in very few words, we cannot disguise what this is all about: *Communication for social change is about people taking in their own hands the communication processes that will allow them to make their voices heard, to establish horizontal dialogues with planners and development specialists, to make decisions on the development issues that affect their lives, to ultimately achieve social changes for the benefit of their community.*

If we take the above conceptual framework to the discourse of development in the past 20 years, it is not something that should scare anyone: Most development organisations have acknowledged already the importance of participation in development programmes, and no less than the powerful World Bank, through former President James P. Wolfensohn has acknowledged that the time has come for Third World countries to design their own development policies, instead of the financial system imposing conditions on them.

However, much of this discourse is just that: discourse. Very little has changed in the actual system of international aid: institutional agendas, red tape and the politics of power have prevented the profound organisational changes that are desperately needed. So, sometimes the response from those decision-makers is: "But we are already doing it. Look at such and such document." Brilliant documents, no doubt about it; they were often written by sincere and honest consultants or staff, but seldom implemented.

I've had the opportunity to see the issue from both sides. My experience includes 30 years working in development programmes with the United Nations, international NGOs and foundations, interacting with funding agencies and governments of Latin America, Africa, Asia and the South Pacific, but also with grassroots organisations in those same regions, including workers unions and rural villages, helping them to strengthen their own communication processes for development.

From the first group, the powerful, the resourceful in terms of funding and technology, I always get the same sceptical questions: How do we know it works? Where is the evidence? Where are the communication specialists that can do the job? And those questions sometimes hide strong prejudices and discriminative attitudes: People cannot decide by themselves. We need to decide for them. Communities don't have enough knowledge. They are ignorant.

From the other group, those who are marginalised but who also are resourceful in terms of culture and experience, I get sceptical replies. The community, when the opportunity is given, has serious reservations: They [planners, funding agencies, aid organisations] will not allow us to do it. They will stop the funding; they do not like us to say what we really think about their projects and programmes.

There is a big gap between those that have the means to affect development and those who are the real subjects of social change but are often considered only the object –not subjects—of development. Communication for development and social change needs to build the bridge between the two groups. But, of course, there are issues of credibility and power that determine the attitude of rejection, and we need to name them.

## **Diverging Approaches**

Who wants development communication to be participatory? Isn't it much easier to just continue the old-fashioned way: large media campaigns that touch people from above? Who wants to deal with real people, have a permanent dialogue with communities? It is much easier to figure out the messages and then send a team to "pre-test" them or "test" them, rather than develop a communication process with the people.

Who wants long-term processes of communication when you can shorten the times with a good campaign? After all, every organisation needs to report "success" by the end of the year, so why should they be involved in processes that may not show "benefits" in one year or two?

These questions are mainly political; they have to do with—at different levels of development—institutional practices and "red tape" that, in the background, hide political agendas and the fear of losing power to the people. The responsibility lies both with local implementers of development (government, state agencies or NGOs) and with donors and organisations that provide external technical assistance. For too many years they have been avoiding to tackle the real needs of participatory development, a process in which communication is an essential component.

Ironically as it may seem, even if the approaches to development communication are already more than 30 years old, the discussion has not yet reached a point of balance and agreement.

The use of communication in development is still marked with the fire of diffusion of innovations and modernisation theories of the 1970s: the need to teach the poor how to do things better is still a convincing argument for many. It doesn't matter if one of the initiators of the proposition, the one that formulated a role for communication in the transfer of technology to the poor, rejected his early ideas. Everett Rogers, who in 1972 launched the "diffusion of innovations" paradigm, recognised in 1976 that he had missed important elements in his analysis.

Basically, what diffusion promoters were saying is that information and knowledge "transferred" to the poor will change their ways of working, producing, relating to each other, and they will improve their lives in doing so.

What this initial proposition missed is the fact that poverty is not the result of lacking information or knowledge, but it's an issue of lacking resources, political power, and not having access to basic rights: productive land, education, health and social justice. It doesn't matter if poor get information on many issues; their struggle is for a place in society where they can live in dignity and information alone cannot change a given social, economic and political situation.

In all logic, development organisations, both international and national, aid agencies and governments alike, should be the first to promote participatory development and participatory communication for development. Why? Because it is in the highest interest of their organisations to achieve sustainability in their programmes and investments. Everybody knows that a successful programme is the one that becomes sustainable over the years, after the external inputs have ceased. And everybody knows that the only real guarantee for sustainability is when people appropriate a programme. Everybody knows that projects fail when communities are not involved and do not take ownership of the social change process.

Nevertheless, if it is so clear and everybody knows, why is it not happening?

Because power and culture get in the middle and are unavoidable issues.

## **An Issue of Power**

There is obviously an issue of power in between. Ownership and participation in the decision-making process mean that power is being redistributed. For power to be distributed someone acquires power and someone loses power. There are many people out there trying to gain power, but very few are ready to release some of the power they are holding: power to make decisions on funding, power to decide where, when and how a programme can be implemented, power to centralise resources, power to provide technical advice, power to say no, and, in general, power to remain in power. The idea that by sharing power with others we lose power ourselves is deeply rooted in the institutional and organisational practices, as well as in individual attitudes.

## **An Issue of Culture**

And there is an issue of clashing cultures: Institutional culture is in conflict with indigenous culture. Communities use communication tools to strengthen their cultural identity, to share their traditional knowledge, or to make their voices heard. But this clashes with institutional cultures that seem to be the pillar of bureaucracies all over the developing world. The pillars of bureaucracy are red tape, secrecy and parcelling of power; the pillars of democracy are participation, transparency and sharing knowledge and power with others.

Many development organisations blame the so-called “beneficiaries” for the failures. “They didn’t understand what we wanted.” “They didn’t maintain the water pump.” “They didn’t keep the timeline we gave them.” The issue of timeframes, for example, seems to be an important element of the culture clash. Aid and development agencies are systematically imposing their agendas and deadlines: “This is a two-year project” or “This is a six months information campaign.”

Cultural considerations about the “beneficiaries” timeframe are usually absent: They are not consulted. They are not asked if what they are meant to do can be done in six months or one year, or more. This is particularly relevant to communication for social change as the opposite of social marketing campaigns: The pace of development should be driven by the communities involved, not by the donor agencies or the agencies that provide technical assistance. Bureaucrats can push papers all year round, but communities both in urban and rural areas have to deal with the monsoon or agricultural cycles to be able to work. And often, they deal with bureaucracy that impedes implementation of activities.

Why is it so difficult to agree on reasonable timeframes? Most development agencies account for the funds they receive on a yearly basis and traditionally their reporting system is annual. This means that every year’s end, they need to show results, whether they have them or whether they need to exaggerate them to satisfy the donor institution. The “annual report syndrome”, as I call it, is one of the worst enemies of development. It forces a chain of lies and exaggerations from the grassroots level up to the implementers and funding institutions.

Timeframes for programmes and projects are typically irrational and make no sense in a development context. Social or economic problems that are being carried for decades cannot be solved in two or three years. A long-term vision is needed, but this vision clashes with institutional red tape and timelines. The long-term vision is seldom present in aid organisations. And it is not only an issue of funding. It’s also an issue of bureaucratic standards: Reporting success in the short time is necessary to compete with other institutions for a glory that’s doesn’t last so long. Many issues are getting worse while donors and implementers are playing around with perfect planning documents.

## **HIV/AIDS: Multiple Case Studies**

The pressure to deliver positive results every year has actually gotten worse. For example, the situation of HIV/AIDS instead of preventing further cases in the most affected regions of the third world. The top-down campaign approach

has funnelled more funding than any other single development issue. Massive information strategies on HIV/AIDS have not resulted in noticeable positive progress; the number of cases continues to go up.

Let's consider the following example. By 1997 the World Bank reported that 30 million people were living with HIV/AIDS; however, by 2006 statistics from the United Nations agencies revealed that the number had climbed to 45 million. Something has gone wrong, very wrong, and vertical marketing-style campaigns have a lot to do with it.

A key lesson emerges from comparing two countries, Brazil and South Africa. South Africa is the country in the world with most HIV/AIDS cases, and the number keeps growing, in spite of continuous funding to massive media campaigns. If we believe the statistics, Brazil should be on top of the lists of countries with the highest number of HIV/AIDS cases. In 1990 this country had twice as many cases than South Africa. However, current data show that Brazil has managed to maintain the number of cases surprisingly low, whereas South Africa is the country with the larger number of HIV-AIDS cases in the world.

What happened? In the mid nineties, both countries had comparable population figures and a similar income of US\$ 5,000 per capita. Brazil is winning its battle against HIV/AIDS, whereas South Africa continues losing ground to it. The reason, analysed by a team of Canadian researchers, is that Brazil focused on prevention, whereas South Africa focused on curative measures. But that is not the only difference: Massive, top-down information campaigns and highly centralised, vertical programmes were implemented in South Africa, while in Brazil thousands of small, local projects and participatory communication initiatives multiplied all over the country, reaching the objectives much faster.

Local groups, churches, youth clubs and other types of grassroots organisations joined the effort, each through its own means. More than 600 organisations were involved in the process. Catholic priests, defying the conservative stand of the Vatican on the use of condoms, openly promoted it. Positive messages about sex life were produced, in contrast to scary campaigns promoting abstinence from sex or evil consequences. People in Brazil were, above all, consulted and drawn into the collective effort. The social capital existing in the country was mobilised.

Moreover, Brazil didn't just focus on prevention and underestimate the care of people already living with HIV/AIDS. On the contrary, they designed a strong policy to provide free drugs. They declared HIV/AIDS a national emergency, which allowed them not to pay the huge royalties pharmaceutical laboratories wanted for their expensive drugs. Brazil started producing the drugs itself and offered them, along with free food, for the poorest patients. The strategy was not top-down or entirely bottom-up; it was a combination of policies and creativity of hundreds of local organisations; participation, dialogue and community media were at the core of social changes that took place.

We now have many examples about what works and what does not work in fighting HIV/AIDS in the world.

## **Challenges of Participatory Communication**

Communication is the lifeblood of participatory development. Participation in development programmes and projects cannot occur without communication for a simple reason: participation *is* communication; the concepts are entangled, intimately knotted as the strings in a fisher's net.

From its Greek and Latin origins, the word communication has a clear meaning: sharing, being part of, entering into dialogue. Why then the current confusion between information and communication? Even specialists of information and communication use the terms interchangeably all the time and use both words as if they had the same meaning.

The simple distinction between one-way (information) and two-way (communication) doesn't seem to be part of the very elaborate academic discussions.

A similar distinction is to be made between "access" and "participation", which are so often confused; and between journalists and communicators, even between communication (the human process) and communications (the hardware). The confusion is perverse because it distorts the analysis.

On top of the conceptual confusions, the political attitudes between those that have the power and those that want a share of it do not contribute to sustainable development. The centralistic mentality of donors and aid agencies in Europe and North America cannot conceive other means than those that are vertical and centralised. "Bottom-up behaviour seems illogical to Western minds because we have a hierarchical bias against self-organisation."

### **The Double 'E'**

Many donors and aid organisations have found a good argument to justify their reluctance to fund programmes that involve participatory communication approaches, rather than vertical, mass media campaigns. The argument is a double "e" –for *evidence* and *evaluation*, which, in the end, is only one "e": *excuse*. "Show us evidence that it works and we will support it," they say. Ironically, they didn't request the same positive evidence to fund expensive campaigns that do not work, and the copious evidence of failures doesn't prevent them from maintaining the funding of old strategies of diffusion and social marketing.

There is no question on the need to evaluate. The question is: *What* do we evaluate? Programme activities or the resulting social change, if any? *How* do we evaluate? Quantity or quality? *Who* evaluates? External consultants or the community of "beneficiaries"? *When* is the evaluation done? At the peak of inputs or several years after the technical assistance ended? *Who* benefits from the evaluation results? Communities or the implementing agencies?

Evaluation has become, for many agencies, the mechanical procedure by which data useful for institutional reports are retrieved. There is little concern about the real benefits to the intended "beneficiaries," who are seldom consulted. Evaluations are too often a mass of numbers with no indication about quality of delivery, let alone about evidence on social changes that may have occurred.

It is easy to evaluate campaigns along quantitative criteria: "X number of messages were produced; they were broadcasted through radio and television Y number of times; and they reached Z million people". Usually, tricky suppositions are made for counting the people, assuming, for example, that in each household four or five people were listening to the radio at the time a particular campaign jingle was aired. Sometimes these quantitative evaluations use "focus groups" –a technique subject to manipulation—to collect opinions from the audience but above all to legitimise the results. There are seldom indications about social changes that occurred as the result of campaigns. Did the incidence of malaria, TB or HIV go down after the campaign? Did people get better organised to face development challenges? Did communities develop their own capacity to communicate about the issues that were promoted?

Evaluation shouldn't be about counting but about the quality of life improvement. Social change cannot be evaluated the same ways rice production or manufacturing of bicycles are evaluated. If counting the number of schools, teachers, students and days in the classroom per year, in a given country or province, we may get useful numbers about coverage and infrastructure but not about the quality of education. The numbers will not tell much about the learning process or the contribution of education to social change. Other specific instruments have been developed to evaluate the quality of education, and they are not based on counting.

Likewise, new instruments are needed to monitor and evaluate the quality of the processes of communication for social change. Media statistics will reveal only one side of the coin, but the most important information to gather is on the other side: how people really benefited.

Is it lack of understanding about evaluation processes of capacity development? Or the demand for evidence and evaluation is just an excuse to avoid releasing some of the centralised power, as suggested earlier?

Participatory processes of development and communication cannot be measured with a stick and reduced to numbers. Donors and implementing agencies fail to accompany a vision of social change that goes beyond quantifiable activities.

According to the groundbreaking book *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*:

Perhaps funders should be looking at supporting people, not projects. The funding community in North America has fallen under the enchantment of measurable outcomes. Such an approach is appropriate when problems are well understood and solutions are known. But for the complex problems that social innovators address, an equally innovative funding approach is required... Evaluation, almost always scary, has become a major barrier to social innovation. Premature and sceptical demands for accountability can shut down social innovations just as they're starting to take off... In the current climate of exposures and malpractice in corporate executive suites and government departments, evaluation has come to be defined rather rigidly.

Ironically, funding agencies seem comfortable with evaluations that hide the truth and promote false expectations. The traditional accountability system forces those that receive funds to exaggerate results and hide failures. Unbelievable as it may seem, this is a current practice within United Nations agencies and many other development organisations: success must be shown, real or not, in order to ensure more funding. There is no critical analysis when it gets to self-evaluation.

The traditional methods are not sufficient to evaluate participatory communication, social innovation and ultimately social change. Communicators for social change are concerned that evaluations that do not recognize the *process* can negatively affect it at the early stages.

The alternative to the quantitative, vertical and external evaluation that doesn't take into account the process and the local culture, is developmental evaluation that integrates critical thinking and creativity, and is based on participatory methods. No one is in a best position to evaluate social change than those that are the subjects of it. Have their lives changed? How? They can tell it through their own stories and their own voices.

According to *Getting to Maybe*, "It involves long-term partnering relationships between evaluators and those engaged in innovative initiatives and development. Developmental evaluators ask probing questions and track results to provide feedback and support adaptations along the emergent path."

There are several important approaches to participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and to ethnological action research (EAR). Many practitioners as well as scholars have been working in recent years in developing methodologies and systems to evaluate with the people, from the people. Online discussions such as Pelican or Outcome Mapping have brought to attention a wealth of information, reports, experiences and methodologies that point in the same direction: it is time for people to evaluate if international and external aid is really benefiting them, and how.

## **Far from the Madding Crowd**

What does all the above have to do with the academic world, a world that safely develops itself *far from the madding crowd*, as the title of Thomas Hardy's novel puts it?

It has all to do because development programmes are increasingly in need of *Communicators*, and universities are mostly providing *journalists*. Again, these are two words used indistinctly although they have different meanings. The confusion between journalists and communicators is preventing the discussion about the professional profile that is needed in development and communication for social change.

What we need in development is high-end communication specialists and communication activists, as well: Both are essential to work with participatory approaches. There are many communication activists already, most of them trained by doing. Thousands are already working at the community level, and do not need a certificate of communication studies, let alone of journalism studies.

What we are still missing is high-level communication planners and strategists, professionals with a long-term vision of communication for development. These are seldom provided by universities, which focus generally on media studies, not on communication processes. Media studies deal with radio, television, print, advertising, cinema, or public relations, but none of these makes any sense in the development context if not integrated with perspectives that lead to participatory processes for sustainable development.

A journalist is good at working with messages; a communicator is strong at working with processes. The approach is different and complementary, but the problem is that universities are producing about 50,000 new journalists every year, and only a handful of communicators. There are only 20 universities in the world that have specialisations in communication for development and social change, whereas 2000 universities have established programmes that are media-oriented. Technical careers in radio or television are often elevated to a master's level, with little questioning about *why* these specializations are needed.

There is more concern for industrial and market satisfaction than for development, as if problems were not real in our countries, and present every day. Universities are feeding the private sector with fresh blood, and leaving aside their social responsibilities toward national development.

Hyderabad, November 2, 2007