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# Playing with fire: power, participation, and communication for development

*Alfonso Gumucio Dagon*

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*Communication and its role in development and social change is still poorly understood and supported by large development players, despite decades of innovative practice and positive outcomes. Gaps between discourse and action, outdated evaluation methods, short timeframes, red tape, and power relations, combined with vertical and externally-driven communication models, and confusion between information and communication, all prevent development donors from giving support to participatory and community owned and managed communication initiatives. On the basis of decades of experience and observation, four key recommendations are made for transforming the communication profession both in higher education and in donor and development agencies.*

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Governance and public policy; Rights; Technology

## Introduction

Analysing the politics of development communication is playing with fire.<sup>1</sup> Communication for development is a subject as tricky as development itself. This will not be the first time it has been discussed. Communication for development and social change has been around since the early 1970s; nevertheless and ironically, it is 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 about: communication for social change is about people taking into 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 take decisions on the development issues that affect their lives, to ultimately achieve social changes for the benefit of their community.

If we place the above framework into the discourse of development since the mid-1980s, it is not something that should scare anyone: most development organisations have already acknowledged the importance of participation in development programmes, and no less than the World Bank, through its former President James P. Wolfensohn, said that the time had come for Third World countries to design their own development policies, instead of the financial system imposing programmes on them:

*There is immense pressure to move quickly: The world is impatient. But we should recognise that there will often be a trade-off between moving fast and the genuinely participatory approach that is central to the new approach. If we fail to allow the time to genuinely open the process to different development actors and to the poor themselves in the design, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies, we might win some immediate battles, but we'd lose the long-run war to develop the accountable institutions that are essential to poverty reduction. Drafting strategy papers in Washington that are subsequently signed off by governments in the name of the people should be a thing of the past. (Shah and Youssef 2002: 1)*

Nevertheless, much of the 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: '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; however, they are seldom taken into real practice in countries where development is a word loaded with frustration.

I've had the opportunity to see the issue through various angles of the crystal (Gumucio Dagron 2001; Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006). My experience includes 30 years working in development programmes with the United Nations, with international NGOs and foundations, with local NGOs, and interacting with funding agencies and governments of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, but also with grassroots organisations in those same regions, workers' unions and rural villages, trying to help them strengthen their own communication processes for development and social change.

From the powerful group of institutions, the best resourced in terms of funding and technology – but not necessarily in terms of knowledge and savvy – I always get the same sceptical comments: 'how do we know participatory communication 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: 'you are telling us that people can decide by themselves, but we need to decide for them, communities don't have enough knowledge, they are ignorant'.

From the other group – marginalised, but also resourceful in terms of culture and experience – I also get sceptical comments. Community organisations, when the opportunity is given to freely express their position, have serious reservations: 'they – planners, funding agencies, aid organisations – will not allow us to do it, they will stop the funding, they do not like to hear what we really think about their projects and programmes'.

There is a big gap between those with the means to affect development and those who are the real subjects of social change but are too often considered only the *objects* – not *subjects* – of development, a model of development that is both vertical and inefficient. It reminds me of a couple of lines from Spanish poet José Bergamín:

*No soy objetivo porque no soy objeto  
soy subjetivo porque soy sujeto.*<sup>2</sup>

Referring specifically to the communication field, Jesús Martín Barbero would say: '*es necesario perder el objeto para ganar el proceso*'.<sup>3</sup>

Communication for development and social change needs to build the bridge between those that affect development from above, with their policies and resources, and those that work from within through political and social commitment. But of course, there are issues of credibility

and power that determine attitudes of rejection, on one side and the other, and we need to name them.

## Diverging approaches

Who wants development communication to be participatory? Isn't it much easier just to continue the old-fashioned way: large media campaigns that fall on people from above? Who wants long-term processes of communication when you can shorten the timeframe with a good 'message'? Who wants to deal horizontally with real people, to have a continuous dialogue with communities? Isn't it much easier to figure out 'good' messages for media campaigns – the 'social marketing' approach – and then send a team to 'pre-test', rather than developing a communication process *with* the people, whereby the participatory process is what makes the real difference in terms of ownership?

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, two, or three years?

These questions are mainly political; they have to do – at different levels of development – with institutional practices and 'red tape', which 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 avoided tackling the real needs of participatory development, a process in which communication is an essential component.

Even 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 who formulated a role for communication in the transfer of technology to the poor, revised his early ideas. Everett Rogers, who in 1972 launched the paradigm of diffusion of innovations, recognised in 1976 that he had missed important elements in his analysis. In an interview in 2004, Rogers acknowledged:

*My conception of the role of communication in development began to change, and the main statement about that was published in 1976 in a special issue of Communication Research, a journal published in English in the United States. This issue had articles from Latin American scholars, Beltrán and Díaz-Bordenave, for instance, and Asian and African scholars. The articles included empirical studies showing that development could happen in a variety of ways, including the importance of participatory approaches. So I edited this special issue, which was later published as a small book by Sage Publications, and my initial chapter in it basically pointed out that the old model of development communication had passed or was passing, and there was evidence to support this thesis. My thinking was changing about the role of communication in development, as was my writing on the subject.<sup>4</sup>*

Basically, what diffusion promoters were saying is that information and knowledge 'transferred' from industrialised and 'modern' countries to the poor of the Third World would change their ways of working, producing, relating among themselves, which would also improve their lives in doing so. 'Leapfrogging' from 'underdevelopment' to 'modernity' was a matter of using new technologies (sound familiar?).

What this initial proposition missed is the fact that poverty is not the result of lacking information or knowledge, but an issue of lacking resources, political power, and not exercising basic human rights: access to productive land, to education, to health services, and to social

justice. It doesn't matter if the poor get information on many issues; their struggle is for citizenship – in other words, a place in society where they can live and progress in dignity. Information alone cannot change a given social, economic, and political situation. Information may simply make the poor realise their marginality.

In all logic, development organisations (both international or 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, to stop so much money going down the drain, spent in numerous programmes and projects, experts and foundations, that in the end have changed little the fact of poverty. Everybody knows that a successful programme is the one that becomes sustainable over the years, after the external inputs have ceased. Everybody would agree that the best cooperation that can be provided is the one that, at some point, makes people independent of external cooperation. Everybody knows that projects fail when communities are not involved and do not take ownership of the social change process; and everybody knows that the only real guarantee for sustainability is when people appropriate a programme.

Nevertheless, if it is so clear and everybody knows it, why is it not happening? Because power and culture get in the middle and are unavoidable issues.

## An issue of power

*Ownership* and *participation* in the decision-making process mean that power is being redistributed. For power to be distributed with justice, someone acquires power and someone loses power. There are many people out there trying to gain power, but very few ready to release 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 institutional and organisational practices, as well as in individual attitudes.

Power can be seen in action at all levels, in any human community. Imagine a rural community where some external aid agency is willing to drill a borehole and install a water pump. This is a simple mini-project from the perspective of the donor, but can be a life-saving project for the rural community. But then, where should the borehole be drilled and the water pump be installed?

The chief of the village may want it close to his house, or sometimes even inside his compound; he may argue that otherwise his authority is undermined, or that he is the only one that can guarantee fair use of the water resource. The school teacher may reason that it should be located in the school, because all children would benefit and they can take water to their homes after school hours. The nurse at the health centre, if any, may state that safe water is essential to keep everyone healthy and that, to guarantee the good use and maintenance of the pump, it should be located at the health facility. Other people may advance other interesting and valid arguments to contribute to the decision-making process on where to drill the borehole, including the technical staff, government, or NGO officials involved in development plans. The location of the borehole and water pump has an impact on the social dynamics of the community: it may promote its cohesion and internal democracy, or may disrupt the social fabric and contribute to further inequalities.

This is also related to issues of democracy within the community, and the prevalence of inherited social norms that may be working against horizontal dialogue and democratic participation. Too often, colonial and neo-colonial powers have used to their benefit autocratic

traditional chains of authority that are deciding factors in any community. The issue of community itself needs to be discussed, as we do later in this article.

What is important to keep in mind is that the discussion relates to power. And power relations is an issue both at the community level and at the scale of a large programme that is negotiated between donors, implementing institutions, and governments.

## An issue of culture

There is also an issue of clashing cultures: 'modern' and institutional cultures are 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. Often, communication is the only resource available to establish their place in a world that ignores and buries those left 'behind' by modernity and technological advances.

Part of the culture clash deals with institutional practices 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 cultural clash. Aid and development agencies are systematically imposing their agendas and deadlines: 'this is a two-year project' or 'this is a six-month information campaign'. The pressures on communities, NGOs, and national governments to 'deliver' the goods in the terms and timeframe imposed by donors or aid agencies are enormous.

Cultural considerations about the timeframe of the 'beneficiaries' 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 in both urban and rural areas have to deal with the monsoon or agricultural cycles to be able to work. And often, to deal with bureaucracy that impedes implementation of activities.

Why is it so difficult to agree on a reasonable timeline? 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-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 to the funding institutions. In my own experience in UNICEF in Nigeria and Haiti, I was often forced to mask our failure to show results and to claim successes even if they were those of the year before.

'Accountability' – one of the buzzwords in the development jargon – is mainly used to point the finger at national governments, local NGOs, or communities that don't make the mark. Accountability rarely reaches the highest levels, that is, holding funding and aid agencies responsible for their own flaws. The verticality of the accountability exercise always leaves barehanded those that are at the same time the victims of a system and guilty for their actions.

Timeframes for programmes and projects are typically irrational and make no sense in a development context. Social or economic problems that have carried on 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, but an issue of bureaucratic standards: reporting success in the short term is necessary to compete with other institutions for a glory that does not last so long. Many problems are getting worse, while donors and implementers are playing around with 'perfect' planning documents. The jargon on 'participatory' approaches that many development organisations have adopted is just lip-service with little real content.

## Communities are not a solid block

On the other hand, it may be important to briefly remind ourselves something basic about communities, without entering into the academic digression of 'how do you define community?' There are, it seems, 40-something definitions of community, and I do not wish to create a new one. We are all part of a community; and we know it when we see it. I've worked with urban (for example, workers from the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores, in Nicaragua) and rural communities (peasant communities in Bolivia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea, to name a few). I've also worked with communities of interest and virtual communities (such as the OURMedia network, and communication for health networks).

We need to remember that communities are complex social bodies, made up of individuals that may have diverging interests – and in some cases, opposing interests. Communities are not pure or untouched, as too often seems to be the implication in academic texts. In synthesis, communities only reproduce what the larger society is. In any community, even the poorest one, we will find the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the ones that are heard because of their rank or wealth and the voiceless.

Many development projects and programmes have actually contributed to inequalities within communities. For example, promoting a cooperative that gathers half of the families in a given community will create two parallel economies and different perspectives on development. This also happens with media, if the communication process doesn't start with questioning the internal democracy in a community. Who is empowered, for example, by a community radio station? Who makes the decisions on programming, management, or finances?

Communities may not 'talk the truth' until they are empowered. I always remember and often speak about my overnight visit in the late 1980s to a community near Dédougou, in Burkina Faso, accompanying a government official from the Ministry of Planning (who in fact didn't want to stay overnight 'in the bush', although he was also a Mossi). The First Economic Development Plan had provided this community (as many others) with similar top-down 'gifts': a secondary school, a maternity ward, and a sports stadium. The 'plus' was the 'Revolution Squares' donated and built by the Chinese all over Burkina Faso, which were regularly empty because barefoot villagers could not stand on the boiling pavement under the sun.

During our day visit to this community of vegetable producers, we had observed that the brand new hospital was empty (the building was ready, but they had been waiting for a year to get it equipped), as was the secondary school (no teachers assigned) and the maternity ward (full of emptiness). Late at night and after the government official went to sleep on an improvised bed in the local school, I remained with a teacher and a few community leaders around a wood fire, burning our insides with some local alcohol, until it was time to put some touchy questions across and receive some real answers.

'The truth is', they ended saying with some sadness, 'that these projects were pushed on us. They didn't even ask, they just came and built them. Why did we want a whole maternity ward? Children are born in our houses, traditionally; less than ten babies were born in this community last year, and so what we need is training and instruments for the midwife'. They went on to explain that the secondary school could never be utilised, not only because of the lack of teachers, but also because there was only a dozen students of that age in the village: 'You

may have seen the green building when you came from Dédougou, four kilometres from here; that is a secondary school, our children go there. Yes, it is quite a walk, but they are used to it'. As for the sports stadium, they just laughed: 'Look at all the space we have around here: why would we need walls?'

What is it then that they needed? The reply was already in their mouths: a small factory to can vegetables, since every time a flight was cancelled from Ouagadougou, they lost the weekly harvest of tomatoes, haricot beans, or lettuces.

Working with communities through respectful dialogue allows communicators and external facilitators to be more specific about their needs, about internal power struggles, about the processes that intermingle the traditions with the external cultural inputs. Planners need to be flexible, to adapt, and to work hand in hand with those in the community that are the poorest and most disadvantaged.

We just need to remember this when working at the community level, to avoid misrepresentations and frustration.

## HIV and AIDS, multiple case study

The pressure to deliver positive results every year has actually worsened; for example, the prevalence of HIV and the failure to prevent further cases in the most affected regions of the Third World. The top-down campaign approach has attracted more funding than any other single development issue. Massive information strategies on HIV and AIDS have not resulted in noticeable positive progress – the number of cases continues to increase.

Let's consider the following example. By 1997, the World Bank reported that 30 million people were living with HIV; however, by 2006 statistics from 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 the most HIV and 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 and AIDS cases. In 1990, this country had twice as many cases as South Africa. However, current data shows that Brazil has managed to keep the number of cases surprisingly low.

What happened? In the mid-1990s, both countries had comparable population figures and a similar income of \$5000 per capita. Brazil is winning its battle against HIV, whereas South Africa continues losing ground to it. The reason, analysed by a team of Canadian researchers (Westley *et al.* 2006), 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, achieving the objectives much faster.

Local groups, churches, youth clubs, and other types of grassroots organisations joined the effort, each one 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 with warnings of 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 or ignore the people already living with HIV. On the contrary, they designed a strong policy to provide free drugs. They declared

HIV a national emergency, which allowed them not to pay the huge royalties that 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 and AIDS in the world (Rogers and Singhal 2003).

## Challenges of participatory communication

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

From its Latin origins, the word 'communication' has a clear meaning: sharing, being part of, entering into dialogue. Even better, the origins of the word 'participation' have similar meanings. We could in fact assert that communication is equal to participation.

Why then the current confusion between information and communication? Even specialists of information and communication mix the terms 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). Confusions are perverse because they distort the analysis.

On top of the conceptual confusions, the political attitudes between those who have the power and those who 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 means other than those that are vertical and centralised. 'Bottom-up behaviour seems illogical to Western minds because we have a hierarchical bias against self-organisation' (Westley *et al.* 2006).

There are so many wonderful examples in the world of programmes and projects where communication has revealed its importance in terms of supporting dialogue and participation for peace and development. Those experiences contribute to sustainability through the process of acquiring ownership of projects, and communities have thereby made other gains, such as strengthening their local knowledge, values, and culture, and thus gaining power in society.

Among those seminal and well-known experiences that have developed over decades, we can mention the miners' radio stations in Bolivia; the participatory video by market women from the SEWA organisation in India; the peace radio – Radio Kwizera – on the border of Tanzania, which promotes reconciliation among the Tutsi and Hutu of Rwanda and Burundi; the use of video by the Kayapo tribes in Brazil, to regain their original culture and better unite to fight the misdoings of modernity. Many, many examples prove the relevance of 'another communication for another development', as the World Social Forum would phrase it.

So, if that is so clear and beneficial to sustainable development, why are the big players not listening?

The challenges of communication for development and social change cover many aspects, among them the ignorance of policy and decision makers on past and current lessons (such as communication to combat HIV), institutional agendas and red tape, short-term timeframes,

the idealisation of ‘community’, flawed evaluation practices, and also the lack of high-level communicators with the profile of strategists.

## 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’: an *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 about 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 has 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, like any other method that is not truly participatory – 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 in the same ways as rice production or the manufacturing of bicycles. 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 us 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 is the demand for evidence and evaluation 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 support a vision of social

change that goes beyond quantifiable activities. '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' (Westley *et al.* 2006).

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 comes 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 recognise 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 better 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. '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' (Westley *et al.* 2006).

There are several important approaches to participatory monitoring and evaluation, and to Ethnographic Action Research. Many practitioners as well as scholars have been working to develop the methodologies and the systems to evaluate with the people, from the people. Online discussions such as the Pelican Initiative and Outcome Mapping network<sup>5</sup> have highlighted a wealth of information, reports, experiences, and methodologies that points in the same direction: it is time for people to evaluate whether 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 poem says?<sup>6</sup>

The source of the problem is that development programmes are increasingly in need of *communicators*, and media and communication departments in universities are mostly providing *journalists*. Again, these are two words are used indistinguishably, 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 – both are essential to work with participatory approaches. There are many communication activists already, most of them trained by doing this work. Thousands are already

working at the community level, and do not need a certificate in communication studies, let alone one in 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 make any sense in the development context if they are 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 thousand 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 Masters level, with little questioning about *why* these specialisations 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 towards national development.

## Not concluding, but hoping

There are too many pending issues to reach any conclusion, even a provisional one.

My main concern is that we need to move ahead and over the mere newly acquired jargon on participatory communication for development and social change. I have elsewhere suggested that it may be important to set international observatories to provide an overview of the commitment of development organisations to communication that promotes and facilitates real social change in Third World countries, through participation and dialogue. These observatories may help to identify the weaknesses and opportunities that development organisations at various levels (from large donors to local NGOs) have, but that they do not sufficiently analyse.

How can we assess real commitment to communication for social change? How can we go beyond words? I believe four main aspects should be taken into consideration.

First, every development organisation should have a communication policy, clearly stating its position in terms of participatory development and the place of communication in programmes and projects. We have already seen some progress in this direction, such as the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre strategic communication paper, the draft of which was facilitated by the Communication for Social Change Consortium (UNDP Democratic Governance Group 2006). Without a communication policy, no organisation can claim any progress in dealing with communication for development and social change.

Second, organisations should develop strategies of communication for development and social change, different (obviously) from their information, dissemination, or institutional visibility platforms. And strategy means coherent long-term planning, rather than the usual *ad hoc* information and communication activities. A communication strategy means that every programme and project has from its inception a communication component, which acts in support of the implementation of said project or programme.

Third, it is a natural upshot of the first two elements that organisations will need to budget communication components as separate items from information or institutional visibility activities. This was clearly recommended at the World Congress of Communication for Development (WCCD).<sup>7</sup> Budgeting communication for programme support ensures that policies and strategies are implemented and that they are not just good intentions on paper.

Fourth, no organisation can claim commitment to communication for development and social change if it has not taken the necessary steps to beef-up its staff with professionals from the communication field (not to be confused with journalists or public-relations staff). Communication for development is a specialised field, as any other, and calls for creating posts for high-level specialists and strategists – what we currently see is much improvisation, professionals from other disciplines holding communication posts and making decisions on what they barely understand. Or else, we see low-level communication posts, with no decision-making power, usually occupied by junior journalists.

These are some of the parameters that the communication observatories could take into consideration to help development organisations to be more coherent with the language they use.

## Notes

1. A first draft of this paper was presented at the inaugural plenary of the CMS Symbols Conference in Hyderabad, India, 1–2 November 2007.
2. 'I'm not objective because I'm not an object / I'm subjective because I'm a subject'. Cited by Savater (1977: 145).
3. 'We need to lose the object and gain the process' (Martin Barbero 1991).
4. A short version of the interview of Everett Rogers, with Rafael Obregón and Arvind Singhal, was published in *MAZI 2* (CFSC 2005).
5. Both discussion platforms can be accessed through membership of the groups. For Pelican, see Dgroups: [www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican/index.cfm?op=main&cat\\_id=9930](http://www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican/index.cfm?op=main&cat_id=9930) and for Outcome Mapping: [www.outcomemapping.ca/](http://www.outcomemapping.ca/) (both retrieved 27 January 2009).
6. The poem is *Oda I – La Vida Retirada*, written by Spanish poet and priest Fray Luis de León in 1789. The verse inspired the title of one of Thomas Hardy's most renowned novels.
7. The World Congress of Communication for Development (WCCD) was organised in Rome, October 2006, by FAO, The Communication Initiative, and the World Bank. For more information, see [www.comminit.com/drum\\_beat\\_377.html](http://www.comminit.com/drum_beat_377.html) (retrieved 27 January 2009).

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