Chapter 4. Vertical Minds versus Horizontal Cultures. An Overview of Participatory Processes and Experiences

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Introduction

It happened at a very small village west of Koudougou, in Burkina Faso. The name of the village is not very relevant. Not even the name of the country. It could have been any other country in Africa. We were visiting a small radio station, one of the six “local radios” that President Thomas Sankara had set up when he was Minister of Information during the early eighties. Outside the mud-brick small room that housed the station we found lying on the bare floor, under the rain, long rows of post office boxes, several hundreds. Our local contact saw a big question mark on our face and immediately provided an explanation: “Oh, these are for the new post office building, which will be built here. It’s a donation from Germany”. Rust was already taking care of the donation. We inquired: “How long ago did you get them?” He replied: “Last year. But you know, the government has not yet started to build the post office, I’m not sure they will ever do it”.

Certainly, we thought, if we were the government we would never do it either. What kind of brain can conceive a post office building, with hundreds of luxurious PO boxes “Made in Germany”, in a
small village with no more than 300 families, mostly illiterate peasants? We couldn’t imagine any of them keeping a key for the PO box, and visiting the post office once a week to retrieve non-existent letters. We couldn’t see many of them writing any letters either. The whole concept seemed to us imported and imposed by people who don’t know much about how communication flows in rural areas of developing countries.

On the other hand, we could imagine the role that the local community radio could play. Besides its typical role of airing music. If by any chance a letter came to the community, it will go straight to the radio station, and a short message would alert the family to whom the letter has been addressed. Actually, many community radio stations in the world started to build their constituency by providing precisely this kind of services to the community.

We’ve seen too many of these grotesque perversions of development in countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Mostly the result of imposed projects, by irresponsible donors that care more about an annual report on development cooperation that looks good and glossy, rather than caring about people. Very few governments in the Third World will say no to funds from cooperation agencies. Some of them, better prepared for negotiations with international or bilateral development agencies, will put the country priorities forward, but these are only a few. Many other governments will just take anything they offer them, because of corruption or because they themselves are not aware of national priorities in development.

What does this have to do with communication? Actually everything.
Vertical Minds, Horizontal Cultures
During the past twenty years, the whole discourse of development has began to experiment deep changes, from a very vertically imposed and rigid model of “assistance” from international and bilateral development agencies, to more flexible alternatives, that take into account what people really need, or at least, what governments say that their people need (which often is not the same).

The real needs of the so-called “beneficiaries” have seldom been taken into account. International and bilateral cooperation agencies offer ready-made packages and summon developing countries: “Take it or leave it”. They have learnt to identify many of the bilateral cooperation agencies by their agenda. These agendas correspond seldom with the priorities of developing countries. For example, one of USAID priorities has been to control AIDS and STDs in developing countries. Many millions have been spent in many programmes of reproductive health and family planning (birth control), even in countries where the number-one health priority is diarrhoea or malaria. Take it or leave it.

As communication is building its own personality as a discipline for development, its influence is being noticed by cooperation agencies, at least in the discourse, though the practice is yet to change. Even World Bank documents in recent years show much concern about development models that were embarrassing failures mainly because they failed to identify what people really wanted, let alone what they really needed (which often is not the same thing).

The whole concept of development and international cooperation is in crisis and is being reviewed, while more democratic
governments displace the authoritarian regimes and civil society empowers itself to put an end or at least to denounce corruption. The vertical minds that guided international cooperation were shaped during colonial times. They just “knew” what was best for countries in Africa, Asia or Latin America, until they found some countries that had their own ideas about development.

There is no room for vertical minds in a world of horizontal cultures. This was actually well understood as new pressures came on developing countries with the force of a tidal wave: globalisation. In spite of being pervasive in the economic and trade arena, it has encountered great resistance in culture and civil society. Numerous cultures in the world are not ready to let it go. People hold to their mother tongue, they hold to their dress, to their music, to their religious practices. Still, the tidal wave can be powerful enough to wipe many off the globe in the long term, if there is no reaction to it now. Here again, communication in development and participation could be of great help. It is a resource with a potential that hasn’t been fully uncovered yet.

The problem of communication, as it has been conceived through so many decades, is that it was not meant to communicate, just to inform, conform and deform. Inform as a one-way flow of content towards the passive receiver (the old paradigm is still very much alive); conform as a way of adjusting the behaviour of people to the needs of expanding markets and/or for political purposes; and deform as distorting history, memory, truth and culture, for the purpose of domination either by local privileged classes or by multinational conglomerates (the former “banana republics” of central America did learn a lot from those years).
Still today, the English language doesn’t clearly differentiate information (one way) from communication (multiple ways), let alone communications (the technology) from communication (the human factor). This is very annoying as most of the literature on communication is written in English. Mass information media is often referred to as “mass communication”. The horizontal and dialogic components in content flows, which are essential to the act of “communicating”, are simply not taken into consideration. The whole concept of participation, which etymologically is in the core of the word communication, has been ignored for many years.

Communication was until very recently the fifth wheel in the car of development. Seldom it formed part of the essence of the development process. Maybe, because development was not even perceived as a process itself. The lack of communication and its basic principle, dialogue, has prevented many projects from succeeding. That is, if we understand “success” as people democratically guiding the process of change for their own community, for the benefit of the majority.

So why is the relationship between development and communication beginning to change? Why is the car of development now starting to use the spare wheel to redress its direction? It is not because the discourse is changing within the international cooperation, and even less because some scholars started writing about it. Actually, both have come to represent, digest and popularise what has been already happening at the community level for many years.

Participation in development has finally shattered institutional barriers, and participatory communication is helping to make of it a clear expression by communities. Better late than never. International or bilateral cooperation agencies can no longer ignore
what the subjects of development have to say. Moreover, they need them if they want to claim any sustainability in their programmes. Without people’s participation, no project can be successful and last long enough to support social change. This may sound as an obvious truth, but it was amazingly ignored for decades, and still is in many development projects where donor’s agendas are imposed over people’s needs.

Imperfect, difficult to label (which makes scholars feel uneasy), culturally diverse and often escaping from institutional control, participatory communication is feeding a new approach to communication and to development as well. Participatory communication is fragile, it is often contradictory - which conspires against the ready-to-replicate model exercises, but in the end it is as alive as the communities that use it as a means to promote dialogue and networking on issues that are important for the community life: development, yes, but also culture, power and democracy.

**Process of Participation**

We hold tight to words and concepts; that is what most of us do for a living. Maybe it’s time to be more flexible, to imagine that definitions can also be a burden when trying to define something that we don’t fully understand. Let’s take, for example, “participatory project”, which already encapsulates a contradiction. A “project” is something that has to be designed in advance, with a clear understanding of all its phases and results. It’s actually a very academic and intellectual exercise, maybe that is why we like to use the word: research project, development project, and even sentimental project. Participation, on the other hand, is a wide-open window towards a collective goal that we can only imagine
over the horizon. By its very nature, participation is a process and when we refer to a participation project we are actually thinking of a participatory process.

It is true that often a participation process starts with a project that aims to encourage participation. Actually, this is more likely to happen when dealing with development communication. The very fact of implicating communication with a participatory purpose can make a development project different. If a communication initiative is seeking for participation with the aim of involving the community of beneficiaries to the point of them becoming the owners of a project, then a communication process has to unwind over the time to make it possible. The “ownership” of the development project –and first, of the communication component-, is what helps to establish the difference from the typical interventions in development communication projects, which reproduce the sender and receiver paradigm, just with a more progressive content.

Unfortunately, research on participatory communication has often very little “sync” with what is actually happening on the ground. Research comes late or never. It is partial and tends to generalize based on very few examples. There are several reasons for that:

Most of the research is done in Europe and the United States/Canada, while the subjects of research, the participatory communication experiences, are located in developing countries.

- Researchers can only spend short periods of time visiting developing countries, so they tend to pick only very few experiences for their case studies.
- Many researchers work on information readily available on the Web or in other published case studies and information, which limits enormously the scope of their research, and also highlights excessively only a handful of experiences, in detriment of many others.
Most researchers speak only English, which limits their research to sources in English and/or to countries where English is spoken. And even in those countries the researcher may find many difficulties to communicate with the local population, which is only fluent in the local language.

Researches from the North (Europe and North America) have a whole system of values that prevents many of them from understanding local culture and local values of the South, thus reflecting a limited comprehension in the resulting research documents.

Many local participatory communication experiences remain invisible because they are not promoted, funded or anyhow related to the mainstream international cooperation agencies.

Very few research projects involve local researchers who can provide valuable insights on the social, political, economic and cultural contexts.

While preparing a report on participatory communication\(^1\) we came in touch with many experiences that were unknown and neglected by researchers. We are convinced that every developing country is rich in community based participatory experiences where communication is an important factor, but very little of this is acknowledged by researchers in North America and Europe, who too often prefer to recycle in their writings the same few case studies that a few have prepared. We believe that the only way to report and to understand these experiences is being there and trying to capture at least some of the context and culture.

The analysis on participatory communication, more than any other analysis, has to deal with the context as much as with the media or communication tools being utilized. Project documents and success stories do not provide that insight. Those very academic attempts

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to systematize or theorize based on what others have written can only contribute to transvestite the original experience into an intellectual and speculative exercise that has little to do with reality. Often, enthusiasm for the novelty eclipses the description of the complexities that are found at the level where the communication process is actually taking place.

Waves of Change

If we had never been to Radio Kwizera, we would have had difficulties understanding the importance of this development communication experience in the context of a refugee situation. The small station located at Ngara, near the Tanzanian border to Rwanda and Burundi, is the most important media for half a million of refugees that can’t go back to their countries, and can’t go out of the refugee camps to join the Tanzanian or any other African society. Nobody wants them. The radio station, which was set up by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), gives at least a sense of identity to the refugees, besides supporting very concrete activities related to environment, health, education, human rights, water and sanitation, etc. Considering the number of refugees, this is by any standards a “big” communication project in terms of the captive audience. But even if it were smaller, such as La Voz de la Comunidad in Guatemala or the Community Audio Towers in The Philippines, it would still be the most important communication tool for the community, and from their perspective that is what is needed.

Only a few thousand people are reached by a Community Audio Tower (CAT), just as many as can be reached by the sound that travels from the cone speakers mounted on a high mat, to the homes that are scattered over a 4 or 5 kilometre radio. Many in
the success-oriented world of international cooperation would tend to minimize the importance of this type of local media, considering it “too small” to invest any funds in it. But if they would listen to what the community has to say, maybe their perspective might change. For example, people at the Community Audio Tower at Tacunan, in Davao del Norte, told us they were certain that without their cone speakers they could have never progressed as they did in a few years. They got potable water, electricity and a new road. And we could add: pride and a voice to express their culture and identity.

La Voz de la Comunidad basically airs music and short messages for its constituency, the poor neighbourhood of San José Buenavista, hanging on the slopes of a ravine under the Incienso Bridge, not far from the very center of Guatemala City. As other community radio stations, La Voz de la Comunidad has been under government pressure to “legalize” its status, which really means paying the equivalent of several thousands of US$ dollars to buy a FM licence. Instead, the station decided to place the transmission antennae in the lowest spot of the ravine, so to avoid the signal to reach further than the communities for whom the transmission is intended.

During the struggle against the Apartheid, radio was instrumental to defend local culture and to build a sense of democracy in South Africa. Bush Radio, Radio Zibonele and the multi-media programme Soul City had to fight their way towards legal recognition. Both Bush Radio and Radio Zibonele were shut down as “illegal” and only surfaced again only in 1995. Women of Mouse Mpumalanga Province organised, often against the will of men, to create Moutse Community Radio Station, a rural enterprise also contributing to the peace and reconciliation process. Many other
Radio stations have joined since, making of South Africa one of the most fertile grounds for participatory communication experiences. Radio is generally the most successful communication tool in developing countries and usually the first to be experimented by communities that are in search of their own “voice”. Before 1998, for example, there was no radio station at all in Kiritimati, one of the islands of the Republic of Kiribati, deep in the Pacific Ocean. A water and sanitation project supported by the Australian cooperation allowed the community to build a small radio station in just a couple of months. The Tambuli Radio Network in The Philippines represents a cluster of 20 small stations scattered throughout remote islands of the archipelago, all of them serving the social and cultural interests of small communities.

**Images of Identity**

Similar “isolated” experiences are using video or theatre or Internet as the communication tool. We are yet to see participatory television experiences in developing countries, but it may happen when the current video experiences develop their broadcast capacity. Take for example TV Maxambomba in Brazil and TV Serrana in Cuba. These are two communication experiences that in spite of including “television” in their name, are not broadcasters. Which doesn’t mean at all that they don’t reach people. Yes they do, and certainly with much more quality than many broadcast channels. Quality, because people participate in the video exhibitions with a sense of community, a very different type of access than having a TV control in their hands that allows them to zap and forget. The two experiences have in common, along with TV Viva, also in Brazil, that their communication action is not limited to documenting reality or producing educational videos, but
mainly reaching people and interacting with communities, offering poor neighbourhoods (TV Viva, TV Maxambomba) or rural areas (TV Serrana) a programming that deals with their problems, their culture and their daily lives, which are never portrayed or taken into account by commercial broadcasters, and not even by the public service networks, forced to broadcast for a “general” public, thus ignoring the particularities of the various cultural and social settings of communities.

Video is also cleverly used as an instrument of community research, revealing internal problems and seeking solutions through community participation. The example of Maneno Mengi in Tanzania is better known, because it has supported several peasants or fisher folks communities to improve their living conditions by strengthening their organisations and their capacity to deal with authorities. Similarly, poor women in India (Video SEWA) and Egypt (Video and Community Dreams) use video as an organisation tool. Video has also been an important communication tool for peasant communities in Chiapas, in the South of Mexico, the scenario of confrontation between the government and the Zapatista Army, and for some indian tribes of Brazil (Kayapo Video) to re-invent their culture and face the challenges of modernisation and the risks of loosing their territory to multi-national and government developers.

More related with an institutional framework, several video “projects” with a participatory component have been successful in engaging a long-term process of education and communication. Action Health (Nigeria), uses video for AIDS prevention and reproductive health, training groups of youth to interact with their peers through video. Video supports other activities, like drama and inter-personal communication, allowing young Nigerians to
openly discuss issues related to their sexuality. In Bolivia, the Lilac Tent project has also been dealing with reproductive health and sexuality through video and a series of other interpersonal communication activities, which include games, quizzes, and entertainment. A huge lilac circus tent travels from one community to the next offering a wide range of communication activities involving the villagers as well as the local authorities, teachers, health staff and even police and army officials.

For at least four decades, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), has supported long term video projects aimed to support community mobilisation around development projects. Three are notable experiences: the Centro de Servicios de Pedagogía Audiovisual para la Capacitación (CESPAC) in Perú, which started in 1975; the Programa de Desarrollo Integrado del Trópico Húmedo (PRODERITH) in México, which started in 1978, and the Centre de Services de Production Audiovisuelle (CESPA), in Mali, which was set up in 1989 and had less impact than the other two. The three projects are a similar mix of video training and video production of “pedagogic packages” meant to facilitate exchanges of knowledge between grassroots communities and project managers and technicians. Hundreds of videos dealing with agricultural problems and solutions were produced by these projects, whereas the participatory aspects were not fully developed.

The video shows organised to mobilize communities are interesting examples of community-based dialogue facilitated by a new technology. In this case video has little to do with broadcast television and is in fact closer to community theatre, which is another important communication tool in Third World countries.
Often, drama representation is already part of the local culture and part of the internal communication processes.

**Drama in the Roots of Culture**

There is hardly a community, rural or urban, that doesn’t already have a form of participation and communication through music, dance or drama. Even the poorest do. They will have to be much less than poor to have lost the last mark of identity and culture. Unfortunately there are, of course, some of those that have been cut away from their roots, forced to migrate to urban areas for work or because of war, deprived of their language and customs, and their culture gone flat under the pervasive effect of globalisation. This is what happened in the seventies to small indigenous tribes from the Eastern tropical lowlands of Bolivia, which were left without land and migrated to the capital city, Santa Cruz, to become in only few years prey of alcoholism and prostitution.

In Colombia, *Teatro Kerigma* has found a way to strengthen cultural identity –or maybe even re-invent it-, in poor barrios of Bogotá, made mostly of migrants that arrived from rural areas since the early sixties. Since 1978 the Kerigma association has been using street theatre to mobilize the local population around cultural and human values. *Teatro La Fragua* in Honduras, and *Teatro Trono* in the outskirts of La Paz, Bolivia do something similar, just to mention three examples of community theatre groups in Latin America that have organised their work around the needs of marginalized populations consisting of migrants to the capital cities. The three projects include not only theatrical activities, but also a wide range of social and cultural manifestations.
The long tradition of performing arts in Asia and the Pacific has enormously facilitated the establishment of drama groups that go deep into historical memory and tradition in search of cultural values that relate with today’s social problems. *Nalamdana*, a drama group operating in poor neighbourhoods of Chennai, has developed intense activity that goes far beyond researching, scripting and performing community drama to create awareness on health and social issues. The group is also involved in conducting workshops and developing educational materials and television dramas on STDs and HIV, especially for illiterate men and women.

In the high plains of Nepal, the *Aarohan Street Theatre* has developed a network of community based drama groups that use local traditions and modern contents to promote dialogue and discussion about voting rights and democracy, environmental and sanitation issues, as well as other health related problems.

With only “one small bag” to carry props and costumes, *Wan Smolbag* is a theatre group in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, that has also been dealing with issues of governance, representing, among other plays, a few related with voting rights and child rights. The environment is no less important for *Wan Smolbag* and several drama groups that have been trained during the past decade to create awareness on marine life under threat. Their influence now extends over numerous islands through more than fifty different plays that have been created to tackle the topics mentioned above, as well as AIDS/STDs and other health related issues. In recent years *Wan Smolbag* has diversified its activity, including books, radio programmes and videos.

Theatre groups tend to multiply at the community level, as they represent a genuine form of local participatory communication. The concept of community theatre or popular theatre –as it is called in
Latin America-, has as little to do with conventional theatre as video with broadcast television. In a country like Nigeria, where even radio and television doesn’t effectively reach the majority of the population, local drama group have been instrumental in supporting health programmes of immunisation and prevention. In the early nineties, UNICEF supported the training of local drama groups and the development of plays, based on “Facts for Life”, dealing with safe motherhood, malaria, sanitation, AIDS, nutrition, and other health-related issues. Each play was locally adapted not only in terms of language or dialect, but it also took the culture, rites and practices into account. Around 46 local drama groups were active, touring from one rural community to the next.

**Gadgets or Tools for Development?**

It is clear that the participatory communication process can adapt any tool or technology to support the process of community participation. Although several decades ago there was a tendency to refuse new technologies based on the assumption that they would have a pervasive influence on local cultures, reality shows that any technology can be appropriate to a social change and development process if used to articulate local needs and local contents. One of the most powerful examples is the use that Bolivian miners made of community radio for fifty years, since 1948. But there are many other examples to support the idea that technology can be adapted and “appropriated” by local communities. Video in the hands of market women in India or the Kayapo Indians in Brazil, are also encouraging examples.

A powerful new trend has been developing in recent years under the worldwide impact of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Agitating the banners of “e-mail for all” or
“Internet for all”, many governments, multinational corporations and international development agencies have teamed to provide “access” to computers and Internet to every community in the world. The chant of sirens of technology saving the world from poverty has been heard in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Millions are been invested in strengthening national networks and setting telecentres or “information shops” in the most remote rural areas, where there is no electricity or telephone available. ICTs have become the latest fashion in the development jargon.

Unfortunately, the large majority of ICTs projects are not being set up for the benefit of intended communities. An important part of the trend is just “business as usual”, meaning, companies selling by thousands pieces of hardware and software, and other intermediaries benefiting from the transfer of technology: consulting firms from Europe and the US, Third World government bureaucrats and a few universities. The ICTs “instant remedy” to underdevelopment and social exclusion sounds too much like the trendy “diffusion of innovations” of the seventies. Again, transfer of technology is seen as the panacea, the ultimate solution, regardless of social, economic and political causes, and also regardless of the cultural implications of introducing new technologies that carry within, as a Trojan horse, the culture of globalisation.

In the frenzy of competing to provide computers and connectivity, most of ICTs projects are overlooking obvious facts. It is almost boring to repeat what we all now know, but it is still worth to do it because many are just reluctant to be confronted by the evidence: of the huge mass of information known as the World Wide Web that can be accessed through the Internet protocols, 90% is in English and 99% is irrelevant to 99% of the population of the
world; 80% of the world’s population never made a phone call; only 6% uses Internet; 90% of all Internet users are in industrialized countries; Internet users in Africa & the Middle East together account for only 1% of global Internet users; 52% of Internet world users are non-English speakers; while 40% of households in the US have access to Internet only 0.005% of the population of Bangladesh uses it. Do we need to continue with more examples?

In the name of “digital divide” lots of money are being invested – and the so-called divide is widening. As long as the “digital divide” is reduced to a technological gap, we will witness the widening of the social divide, the economic divide, the political divide, etc., thanks to new technologies.

Fortunately, parallel to the expanding wave of mercantilism that uses ICTs as the point the lance, new critical voices are joining both in developing and industrialized countries, seriously warning about the consequences of pushing new technologies over Third World countries irrespective of priorities, needs and the local capacity to make a good use of them. Today, we can clearly draw the line between those projects that are part of the technological frenzy and the ones that understand ICTs as one more instrument to be put in use for the benefit of development and social change. It is increasingly clear that Internet connectivity projects that do not include as a mainstream force the creation of local contents, are vowed to failure. Ironically enough, the future of Internet for development is not the World Wide Web, but the infinite Local Community Networks that should be created in tune with language, culture and society. Only the development of local databases and appropriate local contents can meet the needs of those thousands of poor rural and urban communities that have
been graced by ICTs and do not exactly know what to do with it. As many reports indicate, users are more interested in making phone calls or photocopies than in any other feature offered by a given Internet shop.

Other than the voices that are drawing the line in the debate around the “digital divide”, recent experiences are showing the way for an appropriate use of ICTs in development and social change. It is true that there is only one of these projects for every one hundred that are set up with no regards for community needs and culture; however, the experience of well-planned community based initiatives may positively influence the communities where computers were dumped by ICT pushers or ICT naïve promoters who thought something magic could happen in “poverty reduction” when people would access Internet. Unfortunately, by the time communities realize there is a different way of dealing with Internet, it is likely that thousands of computers that have been parachuted over rural and urban communities will be obsolete.

Internet based development communication experiences are rather new and mostly unknown, in spite of a large number of reports that have been issued. Two or three years of development are usually not enough to evaluate the social impact of a communication tool. However, the eagerness of some researchers to immediately assess the operation of ICTs at the community level is bringing enormous benefits. We see this research trend as “research with a purpose”. Meaning, a purpose that defies the academic exercise and contributes to redress the evolution of ICTs experiences as they develop, by the immediate devolution of a critical mass of information obtained at the community level. The research that grows and modifies itself in parallel with the experience that is being acquired by Internet-based development
projects, can only benefit the course of action. India and South Africa are two countries that are outstanding in terms of the use of ICTs for social development, and the two have benefited from early research “with a purpose” of looking at each experience with the eyes of the community.

One of the most outstanding programs is undoubtedly, the one known as Village Knowledge Centers, in Chennai, India, implemented by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF). Formerly called “information shops”, the Village Knowledge Centres - operated by individuals on a semi-voluntary basis, were established to take advantage of new technologies to provide information to the rural population on agricultural issues such as: health (availability of vaccines and medicines in the nearest health centre, preventive measures); relief information (issue of loans, availability of officials); inputs for agriculture (prices and availability, costs, risks and returns, local market price for the rural produce); transport information; micro-meteorological information (relating to the local area); surface and ground water related data, pest surveillance and on agronomic practices for all seasons and crops (based on queries from the rural families); maintenance and update of data on entitlements of the rural families (vis-a-vis public sector welfare and infrastructural funds). The training and materials are in Tamil, the local language. The Village Knowledge Centre enables farming families not only to produce more without associated ecological harm, but helps everyone in the village to create a hunger free area. The villagers themselves identify who the hungry amidst them are; 12 to 15 percent of the families fall under this category.

Similar projects have been promoted in other parts of Asia, as well as in Africa and Latin America, with mixed results. At least, they
aim to be established as community development tools and instead of simply seeing the community as potential user, they also see it as provider of information and cultural parameters. The telecentres in Gasaleka and Mamelodi in South Africa, the Nakaseke Telecentre in Uganda, the InfoDes project in Peru, the experience of El Limón in Dominican Republic, are only a handful of growing community based experiences that are signalling the way for new technologies of information and communication.

Taking Further the Good Intentions

The changing discourse of international development agencies should evolve parallel to changing development practices in relation to communication. If communication is not understood as the oil that will allow the new discourse to effectively move the machinery of development and social change, little will actually change in the development practices.

How does the new development discourse of international cooperation agencies affect the programs and projects supported? Are things really changing or is it always “business as usual”? There are some requisites and conditions to make changes happen. Are donors, development agencies and governments ready to make changes that go beyond the discourse and the good intentions?

One of the indicators of real changes, for example, would be the allocation of budget lines to communication activities in every programme or project. What we generally see in development projects, is that communication is absent from the budget. What we may find is insufficient, to say the least. We may find a small budget for “promotion” of the overall project, which is more related with public relations than with development communication. Often,
budget lines of “information” are used to organize press conferences or to support journalists or media houses. None of these really has any influence in changing the way things are done inside each project. A neat line needs to be drawn between information activities that aim to build the external “image” of a program or project, and the communication activities that should be inseparable of program activities at the community level. We are of course referring to programmes of health, agriculture, human rights, poverty reduction, water and sanitation, or any other that includes activities directly involving beneficiaries. A communication budget should ideally represent a minimum established percentage of the overall budget, and should allow communication activities to take place from the inception of the project, and all along the implementation phases.

A logic consequence of budgeting communication in a development programme would lead cooperation agencies to reflect on their human resources, particularly those in charge of administrating the fund allocated to communication activities. In recent years, some development organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), have increased their allocations to communication activities, but without changing the profile of the staff in charge. Doctors and other health personnel are improvised as development communicators and given the responsibility to follow-up on communication activities. As a result, very often these communication activities do not correspond to a coherent communication strategy. They are just a sum of improvised activities aimed to spend the funds allocated. Such a mechanical implementation of communication resources may not contribute to any deep changes, until cooperation agencies fully understand that communication is a specialized field of development. Some
organizations, acknowledging their lack of expertise, have turned towards external consultants, with mixed results. Too often, advertising agencies are hired to conduct information activities that are more in line with social marketing and image making, than with community participation. It is obvious: advertising agencies do not have the experience and the skills to do otherwise.

Only very few international development organizations have an understanding of the profile of communicators that are needed to deal with development issues. At different levels, these organizations have placed people that are in a better position to contribute to participatory development. UNICEF, for example, besides having an important cluster of information and communication specialists in its headquarters in New York, also has communication officers in the field, in every single country where the organization is present. The communication staff at the field level is known under various names (at one point, UNICEF identified around fifty variant titles): information officers, communication officers, social mobilization officers, social marketing officers, community mobilization officers, and so on. These are a clear indication of the lack of definition that exists. But names and titles are only the tip of the iceberg. Job descriptions tend to be even more confusing, and the whole recruitment process depends usually on people that are not sufficiently knowledgeable about communication. The result: among the hundreds of information and communication officers that UNICEF has in the field, the large majority has no development communication background and experience. Many of them are journalists, media oriented, which partly explains UNICEF’s strength in working with media houses, and its weakness in working with communities.
Other development organisations have no tradition of having communication staff at the field level, but they are supportive of development communication from their headquarters and regional bureaus. Just to mention two other United Nations agencies, FAO and UNESCO have made important contributions in terms of training and setting up projects where participatory communication is the mainstream driving force. We have already mentioned the video centres that FAO has supported during long periods in Peru, Mexico and Mali. The organization has also promoted important “think tanks” and publications. UNESCO is exceptional in terms of having communication at the same level as culture, science and education. In spite of its limited budget and overgrown bureaucracy, UNESCO has made the difference supporting development communication activities worldwide, including many community radio initiatives, but not only.

A look at the main players in international development, both the funding institutions and the development agencies, bilateral and multilateral, show little improvement in terms of providing enough room in their programmes for the growth of development communication initiatives. Many have attempted to frog leap from nothing to “ICTs for development”, with very mixed results. Once more, improvising ICT managers that may know a lot about technology, but little about knowledge and culture does not contribute to change the usual practices at the community level. Communication, which should be central to the introduction of new information and communication technologies, is actually grossly overlooked. The sudden abundance of ICT projects is obscuring the problematic of communication for social change. Just by sowing computers and connectivity doesn’t mean these projects will
harvest anything else but old and outdated machines in three or four years.

**Participation is Dialogue**

The bottom line is that development organizations should look closer to what has been already happening during the past decades at the field level, in terms of communication and participation. At one point we thought their discourse was changing because of their acknowledgment that the place where development really happens is the community. However, the new discourse seems to be already getting stiff due to the lack of exposure to reality.

If there is only one thing that we can all learn from participatory communication experiences and their mixed results, is that dialogue is the key for development. If civil society is to take a larger role in conceiving and working for development, then dialogue is unavoidable. If development organizations are ready to change their practices and their relation with governments and the civil society, then dialogue is essential at the community level. Participatory communication movements are an invitation to dialogue, which ought not to be refused.