

# EDITORIAL

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## **(Re)defining the role of participatory and supportive communication for development in Africa**

For half a century, Africa has suffered from a "development overdose". After the Second World War the West promised the continent that it would "be developed" on a mass scale, using mass media. However, with traditional media making little impact, a new saviour is born: Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Yet, the wonders of ICTs are accessible only to a small percentage of Africans. The gulf between the "haves" and "have-nots" is widening by the day. Can communication for development help bridge this widening gap? This special edition of *Communicare* highlights salient issues on development communication (DC) and contributes towards the search for solutions to poverty eradication in Africa.

In the efforts to theorise the essentials of the "new paradigm" of DC, Development Support Communication (DSC) and Participatory Communication (PC) are two of the most prominent strategies that have emerged. Both these approaches stress the crucial role of culturally based, mediating communication. In most of the articles the vital role of the human agency in the ICTs chain is emphasised and backed by case studies. Contributors attempt to relate the new ITs to grassroots participation.

Mukasa addresses this lacuna by proposing a linkage with the Global Knowledge for Development (GKD) "movement" that has gained international support and momentum, and relating it to circumstances specific to southern Africa. Instead of considering mass media only within a discredited diffusionist paradigm, these media should be seen as a central component of the strategic development agenda for Africa. Moreover, the communication component should receive the focus it deserves in the comprehensive National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) that is at present being planned by governments of a number of African countries. In the process of planning their NICI even a small country such as Namibia has realised the importance of a DC focus and invited three of the contributors to this edition (Mukasa, Agunga and Malan) to participate in the planning workshop. A major concern about African development is not so much that the war on poverty is far from being won but because often the practice of development administration lacks professionalism. Agunga calls for involving beneficiaries in democratic project decision making, for conducting systematic social science research as the basis for external intervention, and for building the capacities of indigenous officials to reduce national dependence on expatriate expertise have mostly gone unheeded. Development policies nowadays are generally sound but until these are properly carried out poverty eradication will be

impossible. The paper argues that it will require development communication expertise to help implement the policies and hence the need for DSC experts in development programming. The author examines the promise DSC has for making projects work better and urges donor agencies to incorporate DSC professionalism into their projects.

In most articles the importance of an endogenous, culturally sensitive and community-related communication process is emphasised. In Africa the distinctions between culture as an everyday way of life, development as a way of improving one's own way of life and that of the community, and communication as a way of everyday interaction, will remain largely academic. Following the lead of UNESCO, Malan argues that development should be seen as part of culture where the development goal is helping people improving their living conditions and communities. He suggest that the DC facilitator can promote a cultural approach to development by linking all the development agencies to the community. A major function of the facilitator is cultural and linguistic translations such as relating basic messages and knowledge to the community's way of life and adapting messages to the community's communication networks. Malan notes that of vital importance to the communication function is the process of negotiating the context-specific meaning of development itself.

A number of contributors feel that the time is ripe to revisit basic concepts surrounding DC and relate them to local circumstances. Burton notes hat there is opportunity for widespread application of DSC in South Africa's development. However he also warns that the whole question of development interventions needs critical examination in terms of its cultural relevance. His argument is that the national communication debate has not tackled issues relating to information and action, information in narrowing the knowledge gap, and the relationship between information and sustainable development. Burton therefore urges DC discourse to focus on these issues. Burton therefore addresses the lack of a continuing DC discourse: There seems no easy way, in present day South Africa, to extend the debate on the role of communication in development. Since the ground breaking Symposium on Culture, Communication, Development hosted by the HSRC and UNESCO in 1996, and the follow-up in 1997, there has been an explosion of networking around the issues of culture and electronic communication, but little academic engagement with themes raised by a distinguished cast of local and foreign experts on DSC itself.

One of the major questions addressed by the global community is how to enable communities, particularly in rural and often impoverished areas, to have access to ICTs and particularly the boundless information of the Internet. Conradie's survey shows the use of community centres as the locus for rural participation. Rural telecentres are accepted as the most feasible channels for using ICTs for rural

development. In South Africa this strategy has been adopted as policy by various government departments and the Universal Service Agency (USA). In urban settings telecentres can be effectively located at existing infrastructures of libraries, post offices, and schools. Conradie's survey of lessons learned points to the need for DSC facilitator to give a human face to ICTs in rural development. The facilitator will promote full community involvement, human resource development through capacity-building, thus countering the present "technophobia" approach to development. Conradie's key message is that "projects should not be led by technology".

One of the major reasons why DC has received relatively little attention in this country is that communication is usually "taken for granted" in a development project and does not become an integral part of development planning. DC advice is usually sought only when real communication problems surface during implementation, often too late for the communicator to make any meaningful impact. Few developers deny the need for development communication; however, usually they assume that its and databases are sufficient. More case studies, research and education are needed to convince policymakers of the importance of the physical presence of the DSC practitioner in development programming both in South Africa and elsewhere in the continent. A number of articles are intended to supplement this body of knowledge.

Burger looks at cost recovery as a significant component of a communication approach to development. She examines the financial dilemma of local authorities caused by the culture of non-payment for municipal services. She argues that the tendency of South Africa's poor not to pay for public services, what she calls the "non-payment culture", should be examined from a development perspective and suggests using small group communication, community workshops, and budgetary training techniques to sensitise local communities of the need to pay for government services and to engage in self-sustainable, financially independent community development.

Verwey and Crystal also suggest ways for bridging the communication gap between policymakers and people. Focusing on the role of DSC in health communication, they argue that improved communication at all levels of the development decision-making hierarch is a necessary prerequisite if South Africa is to improve the health status of its population. They present a critical analysis of the government's approach to health care and suggest that the need to integrate communication as a central component of community healthcare management.

In a case study of the Tswaing Crater Museum development project Malan and Grossberg describe how an endogenous communication approach was used to promote human resource development, empowerment, affirmation of cultural

identity, environmental protection and sustainability. They note that even though the project began with communication in mind, the communication functions were discovered through trial and error. The case study also revealed that the Western development model persisted at the Tswaing project. The authors found that many inadequacies of project plans could be alleviated with participatory communication practices. They found that a comprehensive, endogenously-based communication strategy is the best method for promoting democratic participation and a free flow of information.

In conclusion, after nearly fifty decades of external agencies trying to develop Africa, one fact has become apparent. Development is possible only if people accept it as a part of their own cultural transformation. Sustainable, indigenous development requires that people develop a critical consciousness of their own situation and then take action to improve it. The role of outsiders must be helping to develop this critical awakening, that is, communication. Through an effective communication process, local people learn about resource availability and development alternatives and are encouraged, through facilitation, to make development choices that fit their lifestyles. Therefore, communication is not peripheral but central to the development process.

Communication is interaction and the basis for cultural transformation. It is argued in many of the articles that frequent development project failures in Africa results from the inability of developers to pursue systematic, social scientific, communication-based, development approaches for understanding community needs, resource potential, and mobilising beneficiaries for active participatory development. It is also argued that while its supplement the communication process, they do not replace it. Thus, communication, not just information, is the key to development. It will not make a dent in poverty eradication if communication scientists are not included in development project teams to provide a human face to it usage. Synthesised from the various articles, the communicator's roles include helping to identify community needs, using culturally appropriate communication strategies, building programme teams that recognise their common goals, and generally offering a professional approach to holistic development wherein the communication unit is seen as the facilitating element of community development.

If this special edition of *Communicare* has helped to raise the level of discourse on the role of communication in development, including the promise of ICTs in narrowing the gap between information rich and information poor countries in the next millennium, then the goal of the journal would have been met.

**Charles Malan & Robert Agunga**