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By

Hernando Gonzalez

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**INTERACTIVITY AND UNEQUAL SOCIAL RELATIONS:
THE COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES**

**Hernando Gonzalez
Chairman, Research Task Force,
International Institute of Rural Reconstruction
& Assistant Professor,
University of Wisconsin-Madison**

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INTERACTIVITY AND UNEQUAL SOCIAL RELATIONS:

THE COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

The management of information as a "scarce" resource is a constant concern among private development agencies in Third World countries. Although they may wish otherwise, agencies often make decisions and implement development projects based on incomplete information. As a result, they usually operate under varying conditions of ambiguity, risk and uncertainty (Cohen & March, 1974; Scott, 1981). In this paper, private development agencies (PDAs) refer to non-profit, non-governmental organizations engaged in social intervention. Some PDAs are self-sufficient in terms of resources, but the majority depends on external assistance, particularly for funding (Pfeffer, 1981; Uphoff & Van Dusen, 1984).

Incomplete information may be viewed in two ways: As a deficit and as a surplus. Some researchers say that organizations do not often have enough information to "maximize" decision-making even if they wanted to. Instead, they "satisfice", by settling for "good-enough" solutions to problems (Simon, 1982). Other researchers claim that organizations typically gather more information than they can handle (Feldman & March, 1981). Or that they collect the "wrong" kind of information, using information-gathering itself as a symbol of "rational" decision-making (Taylor, 1984). Both strategies seem to result in information overload. The incoming information tide

lowers the capacity of the organization to make effective use of the data. Ironically, too much information is manifested as too little. This "relative scarcity," in turn, feeds the demand for even more information.

Along with other resources, PDAs need to manage the various flows of information to and from other participants in the development process. Among these participants are: (1) the intended beneficiaries of the project, (2) their constituent organizations, (3) the agency's own staff, and (4) outside funding sources, if any. To minimize overlap, PDAs increasingly need to coordinate with (5) other governmental and (6) non-governmental organizations in related activities.

In those communities where armed conflict is present, PDAs may have to arrive at a modus vivendi with (6) the contending groups. Without their overt or latent support, PDA staff could easily become victims of violence, as recent experience has shown in a number of Third World countries (Collins, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to examine how PDAs can use monitoring and evaluation to help them manage the flow of information to and from the other participants in the development process. It uses the interactive model of communication (Schramm, 1971, 1988) and the participatory model of development (Rogers, 1976, 1987) as points of departure. However, it argues that current interpretations of both models seem to be inadequate when applied to unequal social relationships.

Unequal relationships

Unequal access to scarce resources does not usually result in equal or symmetrical relationships among participants in a social system (Esman & Uphoff, 1984; Hornik, 1988; Mosco & Wasco, 1988). At any point in time, these resources are not randomly distributed but tend to be concentrated among those participants whose roles are considered essential to the goals or needs of a social system (Feldman & March, 1981; Simon, 1982). In a development project, these roles could refer to those agencies or funding sources which determine and allocate grants, low-interest loans, seeds for production, extension advice and other scarce resources. The ability of these participants to distribute or withhold rewards reinforces differential power. The exercise of that power, in turn, could facilitate or inhibit the flow of information (Comfort, 1980; Ahituv & Neumann, 1982).

What is considered essential to the goals or needs of a social system may change over time. This means that power is not only relative among specific participants, but fluid, as shared interests change (Simon, 1982). As a long-term objective, many development agencies state that they want to shift relative power to their beneficiaries. One way of empowering them is through the establishment of their own constituent organizations (Berger & Neuhaus, 1984; Esman & Uphoff, 1984). Instead of relying mainly on development agencies to attain their goals or to answer their needs, beneficiaries can work through their voluntary associations toward these ends. At a later stage, their

activities can include: (1) choosing from a range of development alternatives, (2) raising their own resources, (3) planning, implementing and evaluating projects in consultation with their members, and (4) making representations with public and private development agencies. Instead of simply being recipients of aid, they could become actors in their own development (Bryant & White, 1984; Hornik, 1988; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981).

Reinterpreting interactivity

Current interpretations of the interactive model of communication and the participatory model of development seem to assume equality, participation and symmetry among participants in a social system. They also make no distinction between the normative, or how things ought to be, and the descriptive, or how things are, at least as verified by empirical means. In a development project, "equality" often implies the same status or equal treatment for all participants, while "participation" assumes that all of them have the option to take part in substantive activities, such as project decision-making and administration. "Symmetry" assumes that there is reciprocity in the flow of information and other resources between participants. The inclusion of these assumptions in current models of communication and development seem to reflect widespread support for these democratic values, if only for symbolic purposes (Edelman, 1988).

In practice, treating unequal participants equally, as in the Green Revolution campaigns of the 1970s, could lead to

greater social and economic inequities (Lappe and Collins, 1986). While most villagers in the Third World are poor, they are not all equally poor. For example, landless peasants may require a different kind of assistance from PDAs than tenants or small landholders (Carner, 1984). Even the operationalization of participation could be problematic. The participation of everyone in everything seems to be a clear prescription for chaos (Gonzalez, 1989). But as "democratic space" widens, direct participation could become dysfunctional. Other mechanisms may have to be adopted by those concerned to ensure accountability and representation. Even direct consultation by development agencies at the village level does not ensure representativeness in terms of both attendance and range of opinion. Not everyone can come to the meeting, especially "the poorest of the poor," who spend most of their time looking for additional sources of income. Even if they did, not everyone is equally likely to contribute to the discussion. Instead, the meeting may be dominated by the local elite, who traditionally provide villagers with group leadership (Bryant & White, 1984; Korten, 1983).

The structure of power in a social system can lead to asymmetrical flows of information (Converse, 1985; Curry & Dassin, 1982; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). In a development project, some participants may find it easier to communicate with others. They may also choose to disregard certain types of incoming communication. In addition, some participants are more likely to take part in

project activities than others.

For example, PDAs may find it easier to communicate with their beneficiaries rather than the other way around. They can use a combination of interpersonal and media channels to send their campaign messages. But beneficiaries do not often find the same channels open to them. Unless they have strong constituent organizations, they are more likely to be found at the receiving end of communication.

Contrary to many representations of the communication process (Chaffee, 1975, p. 94; Thomas, 1982, p. 83), feedback is neither automatic nor inevitable (Gonzalez, 1989). The intervention of those participants with more relative power in a social system may be necessary to facilitate the flow of information from those who have less. Legislation requiring public hearings on development projects is an example. They could help in organizing incoming communication from various segments which could be affected by the project in one way or another. Another alternative is the formation of new coalitions to empower those who have been traditionally marginalized in its exercise. A federation of village organizations is more than just the sum of its parts.

Information processing

If equality, participation and symmetry were viewed as facets of interactivity, then interactivity as it applies to a specific situation may be plotted in three-dimensional space (Figure 1). In comparison, some current interpretations of

communication and participation suggest that these values operate at the optimum level in all situations (cf. Rogers, 1987; Schramm, 1988). This assertion is not supported by extant research. Neither is it based on social science theory, except on general notions of altruism and democracy. On the other hand, different levels of interactivity may be identified in social relationships along these three dimensions (Gonzalez, 1989; Habermas, 1975, 1979, 1984, 1987).

Equality, participation and symmetry seem to function at the optimum level only in terms of information processing, and not in social relationships. Since all participants in a communication situation "share" in the processing of verbal and nonverbal information signs, they are "equal" in this restricted sense (Schramm, 1971, 1988). Their response to the message, whether observable or not, also represents "symmetry" in terms of symbolic interaction (Molm, 1987). Individual differences and social conditions may account for unevenness in communication effects (Bryant & Zillman, 1985; McLeod & Reeves, 1981). In contrast, recent explications of interactivity have been restricted to the generation of sequential messages and the reduction of uncertainty (cf. Rafaeli, 1988; Rice et al., 1984; Rogers, 1986).

If interactivity were viewed along the three dimensions cited above (Figure 1), the linear or "top-down" model appears to be a subset of interactivity. In development projects, one-way flows of information and resources appear to be more common than

reciprocal flows, particularly in communication between institutions and individuals. In those cases, the participants with more relative power find it easier to communicate with the other participants in terms of frequency and intensity, as well as in setting limits on the cross-flow of information. For agencies which minimize or restrict any communication from their beneficiaries, the linear or "top-down" model seems to be a "rational" approach to project planning and implementation, in the technical sense of matching means to ends. This may explain, in part, the persistence of the linear model in development work in spite of its reported "passing" by Rogers (1976, p. 52) as the dominant paradigm about 15 years ago.

Agencies with minimum beneficiary inputs in project planning, implementation or evaluation generally follow the linear model. They assume that they know what is "best" for their intended beneficiaries, even without asking them (Esman & Uphoff, 1984; Lappe & Collins, 1986). They label those who reject their development programs as "laggards" or worse (Rogers, 1983). The possibility that those who turn down these programs might be right, given their specific conditions, is rarely considered (Korten & Alfonso, 1983; Ryan, 1976). These agencies also tend to dismiss indigenous knowledge as "unscientific" and "unreliable." While the outcome of these beliefs has often been tragic in terms of human cost (Berger, 1974; Collins, 1989; Gonzalez, 1989), even Rogers (1987) recently conceded the persistence of the linear model in many development projects.

Monitoring and evaluation

A social system may be viewed as a network of information transactions. For a PDA interested in improving its interaction with other participants in a development project, monitoring and evaluation could provide two useful information streams (Figure 2). Monitoring tells the PDA what is and what is not happening in terms of project objectives. But to be of any use, these objectives have to be specific, measurable, achievable, time-bound and site-specific. Monitoring provides a snapshot of the situation weekly, monthly, quarterly, or during any other period of time. Taken together, however, these snapshots could document the process as it unfolds.

Evaluation answers the questions "so what?", "why?" and "how?" It provides the context in which the reported events take place. Both monitoring and evaluation complement each other by the convergence of evidence. They select a number of critical variables as a shorthand to describe the situation and to determine to what extent the project was a "success." Since social reality cannot be reported in all of its complexity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), parsimony applies in trying to capture the project in its most relevant dimensions.

Monitoring and evaluation can contribute to learning in terms of both theory and practice (Figure 2). For PDA purposes, "theory" refers to the rationale behind the strategy of the development project. Since a project can be implemented in any number of ways, strategy always involves a choice among possible

alternatives. The reasons why one strategy was preferred over another have to be explicated to the PDA staff prior to the start of the project in order to allow as much learning from the experience. Explaining why a particular strategy is expected to "work better" than others also enables the PDA to test the validity of its assumptions. "Practice" consists of a set of implementing procedures. Like theory, it is also selected in lieu of others. The identification of these procedures and the reasons behind their choice also allows the PDA to test their validity. Learning from theory and practice could increase the likelihood of "success" in development projects over time.

Real-world constraints

A number of real-world constraints limit the boundaries of learning from monitoring and evaluation. To begin with, project objectives are not always specific in terms of time or place, nor measurable and realistic. While social science prides itself in being able to measure anything that exists (Babbie, 1986, p.94), the reverse is also true. If project objectives are unclear or couched in vague generalities, measurement through monitoring or evaluation becomes an impossible task. The disenchantment with evaluation research in the 1980s following its heyday in the 1970s appears to be due, in part, to program objectives that could not be operationalized in any way. As a result, policy failure in social programs was about as difficult to establish as policy success (Ingram & Mann, 1980).

At present, monitoring is expected in nearly all development

projects. At the very least, funding sources require PDAs to submit periodic reports of project activities. Since there is no standard format for reporting these activities, the range of reporting quality covers the whole spectrum. In addition, there is a built-in bias toward "success." Particularly where PDAs depend on external funding, positive achievements are highlighted while negative outcomes are ignored or suppressed. This tendency appears to be more pronounced where the survival and growth of the PDA could be compromised with the loss of future funds as well as the erosion of its credibility as a project administrator. In order to improve the accuracy of monitoring reports, funding sources may have to review their sanctions on the upward flow of negative information.

Rewarding accuracy over positive reporting may increase the upward flow of negative information within PDAs, particularly from the field staff to management. The threat of punishment for failing to meet clear objectives may be one reason why even field workers may prefer vagueness over specificity. Projects enter a twilight world where neither success nor failure can definitely be established. Even project beneficiaries may be tempted to suppress negative information, if only to continue receiving the benefits that come with success. In China, the so-called "success" of the Tachai agricultural commune was found to be due, in part, to overreporting of production outputs. Prior to that discovery, Tachai was held as a model of agricultural production throughout the country (Liu, 1981, pp. 220-221; Rogers, 1983, pp.

339-341). Withholding negative information has implications for learning as well. PDAs are deprived of learning from their own mistakes. As a result, they cannot seek out ways to prevent or minimize their recurrence.

Theory-building

The absence of theory in monitoring and evaluation may lead to information overload. To avoid missing out on key variables, development agencies tend to hedge on information gathering by collective massive amounts of data. Unfortunately, most of this information may later turn out to be irrelevant to the problem at hand. One alternative is adopt the "zero-based" budgeting concept to information-gathering. It is not enough for the PDA staff to claim a "need" for a specific type of information. Instead, they have to show just how they intend to use that information in relation to project management before it is ever collected. Information that cannot be justified a priori should not be gathered. After all, information, like other resources, requires the investment of time and money.

Theory is necessary not only to sharpen project performance, but to inform PDAs of what to look for. Otherwise, PDA staff could miss out on the unique lessons of their experiences and the opportunity to contribute new knowledge to the sociology of development. If they cannot separate the chaff from the grain, no amount of massive information gathering can substitute for good theory. Unless PDAs are particularly insightful, theory has to drive both monitoring and evaluation. Post hoc theory-

building is often encumbered by not having the kind of data that PDAs need to test their hypotheses. It is also wasteful to have reams of information that nobody can use. When these data are collected time and again for no apparent purpose, someone in the PDA staff has to ask whether the emperor truly has new clothes.

Unlike monitoring, evaluation research usually follows the well-established "rules of evidence" in social science. Whereas monitoring could be subject to misreporting and misinterpretation of data, evaluation has certain safeguards against validity and reliability threats (Cook & Campbell, 1979). This is not to suggest, however, that such safeguards cannot be breached. Evaluation could be frustrated on the one hand, by staffmembers or beneficiaries who are threatened by the expected outcomes. Or evaluation may be coopted, by convincing the evaluators to portray the project under study as a "success." Even independent researchers outside of the PDA are not immune to cooptation, particularly if funding for the evaluation is provided by the PDA itself. In cases where the funding source pays for the evaluation, active noncooperation or selective compliance by the PDA staff may compromise its aims. In each of these situations, relative power held by the different participants could influence the flow of information.

The main contribution of evaluation is to explain why or why not certain events happened the way they did in the project. In other words, it provides the context for the stream of events and the theories behind it that comprise the project. Unfortunately,

many PDAs consider evaluation research as a poor cousin to field operations. It receives little or no money and appears to be conducted from time to time only as an afterthought or only upon the insistence of the funding source. Using its relative power, funding agencies can help direct PDAs toward institutionalizing research as part of project management.

Both monitoring and evaluation have their own functions. Neither one is inherently more important than the other. In addition, neither one gives a complete picture of what is happening in the project "out there." Instead, they present complementary evidence that could reinforce project planning and implementation.

Constituent organizations

If the long-term objective of development is to empower the people, then beneficiaries have to take a more active role in social intervention programs. One way of shifting relative power to these beneficiaries is through the establishment of voluntary constituent organizations. Through this mechanism, beneficiaries could eventually replace agencies and funding sources as the dominant participants in the development process. They could assume the leadership role in planning, implementing and evaluating the projects that they have decided to undertake. In fact, some of the problems of misreporting and misinterpretation of data in the monitoring and evaluation of projects may be minimized by the active collaboration of constituent organizations. They could provide the missing "check-and-

balance" in order to ensure that those who are responsible for the various aspects of a project are equally accountable.

At the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), the establishment of voluntary associations known as People's Organizations (POs) is a priority in its project villages. Mature POs are engaged in a variety of livelihood, health, education and self-government activities. Prior to the completion of a project, however, individual POs located within a contiguous area are encouraged to form a federation. This increases their chances at sustainability, reinforces their power relative to the other participants and enables them to learn from each other long after IIRR has left the scene.

The ultimate goal of development is liberation: To be free from fear, hunger and want. People become agents of their own history. As the late Dr. James Y. C. Yen, the founder of IIRR, put it, the final goal of development is "not relief, but release."

FIGURE 1
THREE DIMENSIONS OF INTERACTIVITY

FIGURE 2
TWO INFORMATION STREAMS IN A DEVELOPMENT PROJECT
FOR PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS IN A DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

WHO INITIATES COMMUNICATION?	TO WHOM?						CONTD.
	PDA	FS	BEN.	BEN.GRPS.	GO	NGO	
PDA		+	+	+	D	D	D
FS	+		-	-	D	Ø	D
BEN.	D	-		D	D	D	D
BEN. GRPS.	D	-	D		D	D	D
GO	D	-	D	D		D	D
NGO	D	+	+	+	D		D
CONTD.	D	-	D	D	D	D	

LEGENDS:

1. PDA = Private development agency
2. FS = Funding source(s)
3. BEN. = Beneficiaries
4. BEN. GRPS. = Beneficiary or Constituent Group(s)
5. GO = Government Organization(s)
6. NGO = Other Non-Governmental Organization(s)
7. CONTD. = Contending groups in armed conflict
8. + = High communication
9. - = Low communication
10. Ø = No communication
11. D = Depends; Situation-specific

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