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Environmental Communication In The Philippines

By

Veronica Villavicencio
We welcome this opportunity for a discussion of environmental communication. For purposes of this country paper we shall take environmental communication to mean activities that lead to action that is environmentally sound. We shall give a brief overview of environmental education and public information programmes. We shall likewise discuss programmes aimed at influencing the target audiences of government planners and bureaucrats, and the rural communities towards environmental protection activities.

Environmental Administration

The National Environmental Protection Council (NEPC) was created in 1977 to provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach to environmental programmes. It is an inter-ministerial body with a small secretariat. It was not the intent for NEPC to implement all types of environmental activities, but rather, to catalyse and influence other government agencies to integrate environmental considerations in their sectors.

Therefore one of its first tasks was to communicate institutionally with agencies whose functions had environmental consequences. This was accomplished by means of inter-agency committees on specific environmental problems which had been identified as needing priority, coordinated action: soil erosion, coastal zones, toxic substances, environmental impact assessment, and legal matters. Two new committees have been formed - nature conservation, and saltwater intrusion. The composition of each committee differs according to which agencies are affected by the problem.

To some extent, environmental communication can be said to have been institutionalized within the government. However our batting average is still not perfect. The last ones to be "convinced" are probably the most critical: energy, the economic planning authority, and industry. Environmental management is now included in the National Development Plan, and the NEPC has been invited to participate in the Investments Technical Committee.
In furtherance of the strategy of planning and prevention, the NEPC implements the environmental impact assessment whereby new industries are required to undertake environmental studies prior to establishment. Environmental planning is also undertaken by means of ecological profiles prepared in conjunction with integrated area development plans.

Environmental Education

Sajise has attributed the growth of environmental education in the Philippines to three factors: increasing awareness of ecological problems, increasing manpower capability in ecology-related disciplines, and the issuance of important legislative measures promoting environmental management.1

The Philippine Environment Code (1977) which stipulates functions of other government agencies relative to environment has a provision on education stating that:

The Department of Education and Culture shall integrate subjects on environmental education in its school curriculum at all levels. It shall also endeavor to conduct special community education emphasizing the relationship of man and nature ...

The National Environmental Protection Council (NEPC) and other government agencies shall undertake public information activities for the purpose of stimulating awareness and encouraging involvement in environmental protection.2

In a survey undertaken in 1984, eight academic institutions were offering a total of 17 graduate and post graduate degrees related to environment such as BS Human Ecology and PH.D. in Environmental Sciences.3

Training courses are conducted on a need basis, both by government and private firms. In the area of curriculum development, the NEPC, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education developed curriculum materials for integrating soil conservation concepts at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The University of the Philippines' Science Education Center has likewise started developing environment-related teaching materials.
In addition to this a few schools provide first-hand experience of environment activities to its students by means of field practicum. The results of one of these will be discussed later. Student organizations have also been active in initiating community-based environment programmes.

Public Information Campaigns

Information campaigns on environment consist of printing brochures, primers (general and specific ones on soil erosion, coastal zone protection, toxic alert, environmental impact assessment, etc.). The NEPC likewise publishes Environmental Quality Reports. Recently initiated is a Research Update Series.

The NEPC has also collaborated with other agencies in organizing Workshops for mass media. Two have been held in the Philippines - in December 1983, in cooperation with UNEP and PFA, and in 1984, in cooperation with UNEP and the CDG. In February 1985, the Philippines participated in a Workshop for journalists organized by ESCAP.

Environmental Research and Community Projects

Over the past few years there has been a shift in research priorities of the NEPC to community-based, applied research projects. Inevitably, these projects include public information drives among the community to ensure some level of support for the project.

Projects such as the setting up of artificial reefs and mollusk farms have elicited the most positive responses. NEPC projects on soil erosion control, mangrove re-planting and seagrass transplantation have received less response from the affected community. The simple conclusion indicates the obvious relationship between projects that have immediate or short-term economic benefits in addition to environmental protection, and the likelihood of acceptance and success. In the case of the artificial reef project - within four months the community noticed the return of fish life.

Since the NEPC is more involved with resource-based environmental activities, such as those cited above, and since majority of these are found in rural areas we have tried to look into factors that help or hinder this task.
Wishing to look more closely at the problem of eliciting community participation - vis-a-vis the eventual success of the environmental protection or restoration activity, we decided to undertake: a comparative study of selected upland and soil erosion projects, and a survey of community reaction to the NEPC soil erosion project in Lemery. I would like to share this evaluation by means of the following case studies.

Buhi Upland Development Project

This project is a pilot effort to test the effectiveness of various strategies in upland agriculture, forestry and community development. It has the dual objective of arresting environmental degradation and improving long-term incomes of local households. The strategy utilized included a "people-based program" and the project had 400 cooperators.

The project was intended to combine short-term cultivation of fruit trees to provide income for the farmer while waiting for the forest species to mature. Propagation of seedlings in nurseries was initially undertaken.

In his evaluation of this project, which is on its fifth year, the USAID project officer offers insights on why there was a slow acceptance by the community of the progress. The problem was still largely economic. Even though the project was intended to provide income, the fruit trees still needed 3-4 years before any income could be derived. Without immediate results, farmers soon lost interest.

To offset the immediacy problem, the project provided incentives to cooperators. The project officer thought that incentives are a valid method of eliciting community support but must be carefully introduced to avoid creating dependence. Incentives took the form of free seedlings and cash subsidy payments for land development work. When the project was first designed the problem of attracting farmer participation was raised.
It was assumed that farmers, being poor, would not be enthusiastic about shifting their efforts from income-producing activities to land development work for environmental protection. A scheme of primary and secondary cooperators was developed whereby the primary cooperators were paid, and the secondary cooperators would work on a voluntary basis.

The conclusion of the project officer is: "It appears now after three years of testing that subsidies have been generally counterproductive." While there were more primary cooperators, the quality of work was poor. Jealousies and negativism reached such proportions that cooperators eventually voted to abolish the subsidies. Without an appreciation of the value of their work, subsidies instead of motivating, created controversy.

Rehabilitation Strategies in Critically Eroded Watersheds: Lemery, Batangas

This project was initiated in 1980 following a request to the NEPC to investigate a landslide following heavy rains and destruction to a schoolhouse in Lemery. The source of the problem was traced to severe soil erosion. The project was initiated to implement measures to control and rehabilitate soil eroded areas. There was a need to determine the most locally effective soil erosion control measures and to demonstrate to local farmers, workable solutions to hillside farming.

Farmer education and public awareness campaigns were conducted, and demonstration plots were planned to be set up in six farm lot. The demonstration areas have not yielded the desired results. Farmer response has been lukewarm.

Early this year, from January to February, the NEPC, in collaboration with the University of the Philippines, Los Banos, undertook a survey and community development work in four barrios or villages to ascertain the social response to the problem. Twelve students, as part of their field practicum prior to graduation, lived in the area and conducted the survey.
There was some awareness of soil erosion although this was not perceived as their major problem. The lack of water was the community's primary concern. Environmental problems were generally not perceived as problems; if at all, "its (soil erosion) occurrence is something they cannot stop and the situation cannot be remedied."

An attitude of acceptance, hopelessness and apathy pervades in the community. The reasons given for not undertaking control measures were "difficulty due to terrain," "lack of time to prepare farm," "lack of information (on technology)."

In two barrios - Niugan and Payapa Ilaya - farmers spoke of their own way of preventing soil erosion and even gave reasons for adopting these measures - "preservation of fertility," "to test the technology to prevent erosion." Interestingly, the survey teams considered these two barrios as the "more progressive."

Certain social patterns emerged that have a bearing on the introduction of new technology: people are very dependent on the influential people (the affluent, leaders, etc.) for making decisions; and there are very low levels of community organization. The project teams recommend the "use of existing informal and social network of communication" and the "improvement of communications with local officials." People participation is stressed as necessary, especially since the local people tended to regard the "experts' views" as not compatible with the "ordinary villagers'" practices.

Soil and Water Conservation Project in Cebu

This project was undertaken by a non-governmental organization called the World Neighbours. Initiated in 1981 in response to the continuing environmental degradation in Cebu, two sites were chosen: Argao and Guba.
To our knowledge this is one of the few success stories in community organizing for environmental protection. In this project the "change agent" played a key role - an element that was missing in the two previous projects discussed. In addition, the entry into the community was undertaken with the least disruption.

The change agent was someone personally committed to the project. Although a foreigner, he had a Filipina wife, had lived in the area for years and spoke the dialect. He lived in the downtown area but visited the farms regularly - more often during the start of the project, at least once weekly in the latter part of the project.

He was introduced by key officials of government who were themselves highly respected, to a farmer who was a leader in the community. Starting with a small group of five farmers - mostly cousins - he elicited their felt need as low income. This he was able to relate to the loss of soil resources and soil fertility, and hence, low yields. The first part of the "training" consisted of slides and photos of soil erosion control. The training consisted of evening lecture, with field work the next day to apply what had been learned the previous night. The next stage consisted of actually applying the technique of setting up the contour lines and the planting of hedge-rows. According to the project adviser, once they had started to build the rock walls, one rainfall was sufficient to illustrate the point he was making.

On the contour was planted napier grass or the fast growing species, ipil-ipil. These were easily propagated and served as animal feed, thus introducing an income-generating factor. Corn and root crops were planted in between contour lines.

Handled properly, environmental protection activities can promote social cohesiveness and cooperation. Realizing that establishing rock walls is hard work, the project adviser introduced a communal approach. One day a week was spent as soil conservation work day. Farmers worked together on one farm doing the heavy tasks (digging canals, moving rocks, etc.). Next week they moved on to another farmer's plot. The maintenance work was done by individual farmers on other days of the week.
The only "incentive" was the establishment of a small revolving fund of P500 to be used for procurement of tools. No interest was charged, and each farmer could purchase one hand tool at a time. The group would be responsible for seeing that the money was paid back within a reasonable length of time. There was pressure on the farmer to pay back as soon as possible so the others could also borrow.

The Cebu project's approach of "start slowly-start small" has yielded 218 farmers now practising soil conservation measures. Nothing is more effective than success. Seeing the results in other farms was enough incentive for other farmers to show interest, to learn, and to implement soil conservation techniques. More importantly, the project has achieved improved yields and increased incomes. Kinship and social systems were strengthened, and farmer leaders of Cebu are now themselves training farmers of other areas of the country.

Conclusions

Effective environmental communication will ultimately be measured in terms of the change in behaviour patterns of society. It should move beyond awareness to a stage of environmental concern that is translated into action that is based on environmental principles.

The difficulties in achieving this, specially in developing countries are tremendous. The task of environmental protection is at best a hazy concept particularly in the rural countryside. Planners and engineers are wont to directly address the environmental problem with technical solutions. In most cases, notwithstanding stated socioeconomic objectives, such projects fail to consider precisely this social aspect of the problem.

It is important to point out that in environmental activities, rarely can we expect the local community to identify environmental quality as a felt need. Except in such cases where pollution directly affects livelihood, as in fishing, or affects health, the cause of problems are generally not traced to environment-related phenomena.
Furthermore, the behavior change usually involves some new technology. Generally, there is a need to look more closely at the interplay between science-based technology as found in many environmental protection activities, and the organizational and social technology especially with respect to community-based programmes.

Environmental communication is a complex task. The medium needs to be adopted to target audiences. Where print, radio and TV may be effective in the more urbanized areas, these may not be as effective in the rural areas. Not much attention has been given to environmental communication for the rural countryside. Considering that this is where most of our people live in Asia, and where a great many environmental problems are faced, we hope to see more research, studies and discussion of this important issue.
References


2 Section 53, Presidential Decree 1151, Philippine Environment Code, April 1977.


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