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Access To Information And Participation In Communication
As Basic Necessities For The Communication Structure
Of Asian Countries

By

Vijay Menon
"Access to information". "Participation in communication."
These were popular catch phrases during the sixties and the seventies when governments in developing countries made provisions in their national plans calling for widespread public information and popular participation in development planning. Attempts were made to disseminate to the grassroots level information about national development goals, programmes and strategies. Efforts were exerted to enlist citizen involvement and support in the implementation of such programmes. There was great belief that public information and participation would accelerate development and distribute its benefits equitably.

This, of course, did not materialize to the extent hoped for. For despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, most governments in Third World countries did not, or were not able to, employ public information and citizen participation effectively and to a large scale to really promote national development. This was as much true for Asia, as for other parts of the Third World.

There were (and still are!) numerous social, economic and political variables affecting communication and development relationships that made impossible attaining an optimum level of public access to information and real citizen participation in decision-making and programme implementation for development. Breaking down these barriers to effect a more conducive climate for gaining access to information and for democratizing participation in communication, remains one of the biggest communication challenges of our time. It is one of the burning issues that the MacBRIDE Commission has chosen to address itself to, and one which we at AMIC also have a very deep interest in.
However, the issue being too broad and having multifarious ramifications, we choose to tackle only what we consider to be the more practical of the various sub-issues of the topic. At least, for purposes of our discussion today.

The Right to Information

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights upholds every man's right "to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Jean D'Arcy and others would extend this right to the notion of the right to communicate. It is the right to engage in a two-way communication process in which individual or collective partners carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue in an effort to pursue and actualize the right to know, the right to impart knowledge, and the right to articulate and discuss alternative if not contrary views in order to come to a fuller understanding of ideas, issues and events.

The MacBride Commission recognized and endorsed this right by saying:

"The right to communicate is an extension of the continuing advance toward liberty and democracy. In every age, man has fought to be free from dominating powers - political, economic, social, religious - that tried to curtail communication. Only through fervent, unflagging efforts did peoples achieve freedom of speech, of the press, of information. Today the struggle still goes on for extending human rights in order to make the world of communications more democratic than it is today. But the present stage of the struggle introduces new aspects of the basic concept of freedom. The demands for a two-way flow, for free exchange, for access and participation make a qualitatively new addition to
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the freedom successively attained in the past."

This is an essential requisite particularly in Asia (and the rest of the Third World, for that matter) where, with the exception perhaps of less than a handful, societies are trying to cope with the demands of change, modernization, and development.

In a development perspective, information is not just a commodity that is to be exchanged in the marketplace of ideas; rather, it is a resource that is a critical component in the advancement of societies. Information reduces uncertainty among a people living out its life in a country at a time of rapid change. Information clarifies national policies and directions. Information mobilizes individuals and groups towards the realization of a country's development goals; it provides them the tools and the skills to become more active participants in socio-political life, in socio-economic development. In this context, information is shared - not gained or lost to the advantage of one over another - in order to come to a common understanding of goals and directions for development.

Certain factors in the communication structure of Asian societies, however, militate against greater access to, and sharing of information.

Administrative Communication.

There is the hierarchical, vertical, downward structure of administrative communication from the government to the people. Laws, decrees, instructions, memoranda, bulletins and other information are funneled to the people - from top to bottom - with the expectation that guidelines for implementation will be understood and followed at grassroots level.
Generally popular involvement or consultation prior to the promulgation of such laws, decrees, or even development plans, is absent even though the people have to abide by these rules and regulations. The government administrative communication structure often does not see the people as a source of intelligent, useful information for policy-making and programme-planning. They are regarded merely as receivers of messages and information who must act upon them as soon as transmitted by the government information machinery.

Compounding the problem is the tendency of the administration to use 'legalese' in rules and regulations, economic jargon and "technocratsese" in its plans and policies, and other language symbols in its information dissemination efforts - words and phrases unintelligible to the average citizen. This necessarily deprives him of access to and understanding of the information that may have far-reaching significance in his life.

Set against a background of low literacy levels and the multitude of dialects and languages that abound in most Asian societies, the problem becomes all the more compounded. While it is true that the government information machinery has in its employ thousands of community development and extension workers in the field, there is a woeful shortage of trained communications among them who are capable of putting across sophisticated and technical information in layman's terms.

Mass Communication

Ideally, the mass media should be used to provide access to information. Unfortunately, in many Asian societies, the mass communication infrastructures are operated as monopolies, either by government or by other vested interest groups. Where the media are not in State hands, the government exercises control in varying
degrees through the usual methods of censorship, newsprint and filmstock restriction, pressure and patronage. State control over the media, or monopoly control by interests with very strong links to government, preclude the dissemination of wide-ranging information, more so of dissenting information. And yet the right to information is needful of sometimes contrary opinion to provoke more serious and deliberate decision-making.

Braid and Tuason in an analysis of the Philippine Communication System, for example, point out:

"The present concept of free press is limited as it primarily deals with the freedom to articulate opinion through mass media. Media owners may support the concept of freedom in the sense of providing opportunities for conflicting opinion but indirectly may be 'selling' a particular ideology or philosophy which perpetuates their control of power."

"We should lobby for better media programmes and legislations which would give the public access to vital information such as public documents, weather and disaster control information, security and emergency control measures, and information which would increase people's capacity for survival."

The experience in Asia shows that government-controlled media are not very effective information disseminators and persuaders. There is widespread perception that government-originated or regulated information is tainted. There is a palpable lack of trust and credibility that even goes beyond political and ideological fields. As a result, even positively useful information is on many occasions regarded as worthless propaganda.
In an ASEAN Editors' Conference in Manila in 1983, Munir Majid of the New Straits Times said:

"It is in the interest of all the governments in this sub-region to strengthen its national news agencies. Every effort should be made to enable the news agencies to fulfill its role and responsibilities effectively. It's 'independent' status, its organizational set-up, etc., should be (made) conducive to its credibility, its capacity to report and disseminate relevant and accurate news and information."

Education

Education has long been considered as an antidote to poverty and oppression. Significantly, it has also been regarded as a means to gain increased access to information and greater participation in socio-political life. To a considerable extent, this has been realized in many parts of Asia.

However, this rapid multiplication of knowledge, and the equally rapid development of new technology, this newly-gained means of access and participation is being threatened by commercialization.

The money costs of education have gone up and continue to escalate; similarly, fees for training on how to use advanced computer technology have risen, not to mention the costs for actual hardware and software. Books have become prohibitive. And costs to connect to data banks and other information centres have lifewise spiralled. Sophisticated and technical information vital for development has become an expensive commodity for sale to those who can afford it.
Herbert Dordick, in a paper on computerization policy, states that:

"... there is a sense that access to information is being increasingly restricted and that information will become an economic good with a price tag out of reach of many. It is often said that a new gap is being created, one between the information rich and the information poor."

Participation in communication processes

It is true that in the context of many Asian countries, participants in politics is limited. Still and all, there remain some room for citizen participation in communication and decision-making processes that can be rewarding for both those in the upper echelon of power, as well as those in the grassroots. This is particularly so in the case of citizen participation in planning and administration, two communication processes that are central to national development.

Ordinary citizens have the right not only to contribute to national development through productive work and to derive proportionate benefits from their efforts; they also have the right to partake in decision-making processes governing the allocation of public resources that will affect their lives. Participation in development planning and administration requires involving people in decision-making as well as in the actual implementation of development programmes. Unfortunately, in Asia and most other parts of the Third World, popular representation and participation in management and decision-making are too often non-existent, inadequate, or reduced to formal mechanisms that produce no results.

As mentioned earlier, normally, communication is a top-down process, with the people expected and possibly conditioned only to receive instructions and guidance. The people, however, must
also be able to convey information not only about their values, attitudes, and preferences, but also their own views of problem-solving. The literature of communication and social change is replete with examples of "development solutions" that did not work precisely because they did not take into account people participation in the planning and implementation of these solutions. To the extent possible, the experience of the people should be taken into account in devising development plans. Communication policy will have to move away from the predominantly one-way transmission of information from supposed experts to the people, to genuine two-way communication where the experience and the knowledge of the people are fully utilized in informing the judgement of the experts. Mao Tse Tung's injunction of "learn from the people" remains valid today in the context of Asia societies.

There is a close relationship between participation and communication. With communication, there can be no meaningful participation. Communication generates the power that energizes people into action. Participation, in its most elemental form, is communication.

As Murray Silberman points out:

"Popular participation can also prove to be most helpful in planning and administration by making available about people's preferences and local conditions that might otherwise not be known. Such information can prove to be a highly useful commodity to planners who often make plans with less than full knowledge about the areas under their jurisdiction. There are numerous examples where information provided by people to planners has made a crucial difference in the outcome of a project. Citizen participation can also prove useful for ensuring the success of certain programmes that encounter opposition from strong vested interests, notably land reform and environmental reform. No less
significant, it also has important instrumental uses for the implementation of programmes that have always been considered as the sole responsibility of experts. This is particularly true in the matter of satisfying basic needs such as health, nutrition and education. Enlightened political leaders, planners and administrators are becoming increasingly aware of this dimension of popular participation." (Media Asia, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1979)

Barriers to participation

Of course, there remains serious resistance to participation in communication processes. Political leaders, planners and administrators, see it as interventionist and counter-productive, particularly because it takes time, money and effort to consult the people. They immediately perceive the costs of citizen participation in decision-making in the short run, and ignore the long-term benefits in terms of more judicious planning and possibly more successful programme implementation.

There is also public apathy, or ignorance, for citizens have been conditioned not to think about community and national problems and their possible solutions. They have been conditioned to expect solutions to come from above.

And there is opposition from vested interests, as well as the reality that certain development programmes and projects do not lend themselves to more active participation in decision-making.

Some Recommendations

What can be done about these situations that deter efforts at greater sharing of information and popular participation in communication processes?
1. Governments should seriously consider and implement decentralization of administrative structures, not only to lessen bureaucratic red tape, but more importantly, to facilitate speedy transmission of information to the citizenry. Government administration should consider veering away from too formalistic, archaic styles of written communications to facilitate delivery and understanding of development messages among the people at grassroots level. Bureaucratic jargon serves little purpose in communication for development.

   a. Extension and community development workers should be provided not only basic skills in their particular specializations, but also in communication techniques to enable them to translate for the people, in simple terms, the language and intent of government public information. The same extension and community workers should be encouraged to solicit information and feedback from the people as a means of generating useful insights for policy and planning; these workers can serve as the feedback channel for the grassroots population to articulate their views and opinions about development plans and policies decided at higher levels. That is, if the people are not yet sufficiently politicized as to form their own community organisations for articulating their stands on certain issues that affect their lives.

2. The media, needless to say, should reflect not only the interest of government or government-affiliated groups but also those of other sectors in society. Failing in this, they risk losing more credibility; or worse, their business. Successful boycotts of media institutions in some Asian countries should serve as reminders to media giants that people power can sufficiently be harnessed
as to render them ineffective. The boycott of "establishment and crony-owned" media and the subsequent emergence of the "alternative press" in the Philippines after the Aquino assassination is an example too recent to be forgotten. The result has been some relaxation in the structures that used to suffocate media practitioners in the country.

a. The media and various community and sectoral groups must mutually initiate linkages to ensure the articulation of sectoral interests in the newspapers, radio, television and other mass communication channels. Such linkages should also serve to re-orient the media to the information and communication needs and requirements of the various groups in society, other than just government and government-related vested interests.

b. The media should actively seek feedback from its various audiences; e.g., greater allocation of space for letters to the editor and other audience-originated commentary; more audience-participation talk shows and commentaries over radio and television. If possible, the media should pursue the possible participation of sectoral group representatives in media planning bodies.

c. The mass media cannot be expected to provide all the information needs of the people, due in part to their political or commercial orientation. Alternative channels like traditional or folk media, community newspapers, and other small media, should be encouraged and supported. They are in most instances acceptable and relevant as they grow out of local culture.
3. Broad-based educational programmes including distance learning and non-formal, community-integrated educational activities should be actively pursued by governments to offset the effects of dwindling enrolment in formal school systems due to increased tuition and other fees.

   a. Serious attempts should be made to introduce computer literacy courses at all levels of the formal educational curriculum, to keep abreast with recent developments and possibilities in information technology.

   b. Asian societies should pursue, subject to some copyright restrictions, the reprinting of low-cost editions of books and other technical publications to ensure that at least part of global knowledge is made available to their citizenry.

4. To enable government development planners and administrators to work with grassroots people more meaningfully, governments should attempt to provide them with appropriate training and sensitivity programmes. There is little in the formal educational programmes of these so-called experts that prepares them for dealing with people at community levels.

   a. The media can be harnessed to point out this problem and sensitize the planners and administrators to the need for closer interaction with people who will ultimately be affected by their decisions.

   b. Grassroots organisations should be encouraged to speak up and articulate before their local governments what they think and feel about development plans and projects in their communities. After all, their involvement and support will determine to a large extent the success of these same plans and projects.
There is actual people power at community level, more than at national decision-making levels.

5. Finally, both the media and the public should be constantly reminded of the people's right to communicate.

a. The media should continuously push, even if only an inch at a time, for more relaxation if not outright abolition of arbitrary restrictive measures that obstruct freedom of information.

b. The people should be encouraged to organise, to get politicized, and to assert this right in order to gain more access to what would otherwise be laundered and bleached information, and thus have a wider base of ideas, opinions and attitudes upon which to base informed consent. The clergy in some Asian countries has taken the lead in supporting this attempt at a "developmental dialogue" between people at policy and programme level and the grassroots population. The media and other non-governmental organisations should lend a hand in the effort.

Every country in the world maintains its commitment to provide for a better quality of life for its people, principally through the planning and implementation of various development programmes. Communication has always played a major part in this commitment. For far too long, however, communication has been considered only as a supporting structure to development efforts. And yet, more and more the role of communication in a developing society is gaining a central position rather than operating along the periphery.

Communication, or the transmission and sharing of information between policy-makers and the supposed beneficiaries of development of the grassroots level, is an essential and driving force in the development process. Such a communication process, unfortunately,
is hampered by certain features in the present communication structures of many Asian societies today. Some of these restrictive structure have evolved from years of colonial rule; others were recently borne out independence movements and ideological shifts.

It will take effort to change all these structures and substructures that made access to information and participation in communication difficult. But experience in a number of Asian countries like India, the Philippines, even Korea and Malaysia, show that with dogged determination, much progress can be achieved in breaking down these barriers to informed citizenship. It is necessary to break down these as well as new ones that may be attempted by societies and governments that refuse to share power with the governed. Otherwise, "access to information" and "participation in communication" will remain worthless catch phrases.

V.V. M.