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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Jahi, Amri</td>
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<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>1990</td>
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Strengthening Participation of Field Practitioners in the Communication and Development Process

By

Amri Jahi
Strengthening Participation of Field Practitioners
In Communication Research and Development Process

Introduction

I think it will be better if we begin the discussion by putting the field practitioners into a perspective of systemic linkages, where they serve as a part of a linking mechanism between research system and user system (Lionberger and Gwin, 1982; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971).

In this relation, we will consider communication research as a subset of the research system, which function is to generate better ways of delivery information and technology from the source to the user.

If we agree with the above perspective, then our task to look for the rationale for strengthening the participation of field practitioners in communication research and development process will be easier.

As a component of a linking system, the field practitioners -- who are usually labelled as Extension agents or change agents or development workers -- are in the position to work directly with members of a user system, such as farmers, rural women, or others.

Nowadays, for certain reasons, more and more people tend to believe that participation of field practitioners in research activities, including communication research and development process needs to be strengthened.
In this conjunction, firstly, we believe that the field practitioners because of their positions have close contacts with members of the user system and know them better than the researchers.

Secondly, as the consequence of their responsibilities to work with the user system, the field practitioners might have better knowledge regarding the problems and issues confronting the user system and their attitudes toward those problems and issues.

Thirdly, the field practitioners might have some ideas about the ways to deal with those problems and issues, which are specific to the local ecosystems, which the researchers might not know.

Fourthly, we are all aware that without appropriate feedback from the field practitioners, research may suffer from irrelevance and ineffectiveness (Amri Jahi and Prabowo Tjitorepanoto, 1989).

Fifthly, we believe that participation of field practitioners in communication research and development process leads to involvement in these activities. Their involvements then lead to a better understanding of processes and issues of research and development, that will create a stronger identification with and commitment to the implementation of decisions in these areas (McClusky, 1973).

Therefore, the involvement of field practitioners in the above two activities is instrumental to both research and development program formulation and implementation.
How to Get the Field Practitioners Involved in Communication Research and Development Process

Though in principle we agree that the field practitioners be involved in communication research and development process, at least there are three gray areas that will need clarification.

In this relation, the first may pertain to the required competencies that the field practitioners need to get involved in various type of communication research.

Then, the second may relate to when or at what stage of communication research and development process the field practitioners should be involved.

Lastly, it may concern with the appropriate way to involve the field practitioners.

1. Involving Field Practitioner in Communication Research

Traditionally, communication is viewed as "Who says What through which channel to Whom with What effect." Along this line, communication research then deals with one or more components of communication process, i.e., source, message, channel, receiver, effect and probably also feedback.

Methodologically, the communication research could be classified into descriptive survey, correlational, experimental, content analysis or other type of study.

Viewed in this way, I think, the field practitioners could be involved in any type of research which deals with communication message development, selection and use of
communication channel, segmentation of receiver, communication effect and feedback.

The question, however, do they have the competencies required to get involved in this field?

2. At What Stage of Communication Research Should The Field Practitioners be Involved?

The research process starts with problem formulation, then consecutively proceeds to the identification of variables, determination of theoretical or conceptual framework, formulation of hypotheses, research design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting.

The above sequence indicates that research is a continuous process, where one stage leads to other stages. This sequence points out that to know what is going on in communication research better, it is necessary for a particular person to be involved since the beginning of the process.

However, considering the magnitude of the field practitioners' responsibilities and activities, will it be possible to get them involved throughout the research process?

The answer to this question could be yes or no. If yes, then what will be the best way to do it. If no, at what stage of the research process the field practitioners should be involved. Should it be in the problem formulation stage or in data collection stage?
3. The Appropriate Way to Involve the Field Practitioners in Communication Research

Before selecting the appropriate way to effectively involve the field practitioners in communication research, we need to know our purpose for involving them (Boyle, 1981).

If our purpose is to gain the field practitioners acceptance, the appropriate way to involve them is probably by including the field practitioners in the research team.

However, if our purpose is to identify needs and making decisions on priorities and to involve them indirectly, I think, incorporating them into the advisory committee of the research team, will probably be better.

4. Involving the Field Practitioners in Development Process

Actually, discussing how to strengthen the participation of field practitioners in communication research and development process should be done together, because we believe that communication research will help the field practitioners to deal with the user's problem(s) in a much better way.

However, for clarity, we discuss the two topics separately. First, the involvement of field practitioners in communication research, which we have done earlier, and second, the involvement of field practitioners in development process, which we will do now.

Eventually, the magnitude of field practitioners' involvements in development process, to a great extent is determined by the power structure. If the power structure allows the local community to take the initiative to act on their perceived
problem(s), then, at certain phase(s) of development, the field practitioners could and will play stronger roles.

However, if the power structure decides that the community follow the preplanned path determined by the central planning board to act on their problem(s), then the role of field practitioners will be limited to selling and advocating the change process to the community.

In this exercise, I prefer to select the first alternative, where the power structure allows the community to take their initiative to act on their problem(s).

If that is the case, then the development process will proceed as outlined by the problem solving approach to development. In this conjunction, this approach consists of five steps, i.e., (1) problem identification, (2) resource mobilization, (3) program planning, (4) plan implementation or action, and (5) evaluation (Thomas, 1973).

As mentioned earlier, communication research will contribute to the process of community problem solving. It is obvious that the field practitioners who are aware of and master the state of the art of communication will perform better in all five stages of the problem solving approach.

Undoubtedly, the field practitioners know what to do and know when to take the lead. They also know when to let someone else to take the lead and when to perform such task as facilitator to the process of development.

In this conjunction, we will see that the field practitioners’ involvements in the development process are much
more intense than their involvements in communication research, since this is their main tasks.

Conclusion

In our effort to strengthen the participation of field practitioners in communication research and development process, we need to find ways of:

1. providing or improving their competencies in communication research.
2. getting them involved in the communication research process from the beginning, in their capacities as members of advisory committee to the research team or as members of the research team.
3. involving them in communication research that is instrumental to the community problem solving.
4. convincing the power structure to allow the field practitioners to take the initiative to motivate and to work with the local communities to act on their problem(s).

References


