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Communication Support For Rural Development Decision-Making

By

A V Shanmugam
COMMUNICATION SUPPORT FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT DECISION-MAKING

By

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Convened by the Department of Communication and Journalism, Osmania University, Hyderabad in collaboration with the IUCSR and the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, Singapore (AMIC)
Thirty years have passed since we got liberated from a colonial power. During all these years, our leaders, planners and administrators have given us a series of five year development plans; we have, as our leaders and politicians portray, considerably 'advanced' in the new economic world order; our population has doubled and illusory indices of national development in terms of growing GNP, industrial and agricultural production, export gains, tourism revenue and so on, are often quoted to us by our national leaders.

However, our thirty years' of achievements are ridiculed on the ground such as that we still have 25 million unemployed, about half of our people live below the 'poverty line'; illiteracy has grown in absolute terms; disparities have widened with uneven economic development; implementation of land reforms has been tardy; our villages still are very much underdeveloped to the extent that even now we use the familiar jargon 'rural development'.

In toto, we have had thirty years of development experience. During this period of a long probation, wide ranges of strategies were initiated ... Some successfully implemented and many falling short of hopes for achievements. Thus, we now have a vast cumulative experience in development, and still haven't perfected our strategies for integrated rural development. We honestly did not run short of intellectual and infrastructural inputs needed for rural development; still our efforts to mobilise rural people's participation in development did not yield desired fruits. In fact, the plight of our rural populace has actually worsened.

Inspite of our much-talked-about vast development efforts, what we see today in our villages are malnutrition, disease, lack of potable water, poor housing conditions, low literacy, bleak rural economy, etc.

Motivating villagers

Recently Prime Minister Morarji Desai said: "The rural sector, which comprises more than 80 per cent of our population has been neglected in the earlier plans. Now, we must make up for the lapse". Emphasising the need for motivating every villager to take an active part in the development process, Shri Desai said that a plan could be successful only if the people for whom it was made, had the confidence and enthusiasm for it.

How did we err in bringing change in our villages? During all these thirty years, why couldn't we motivate our rural brethren to take an active part in the development process? Highups ask for community participation, they ask for self-help, they finally demand signs of development, all but to their dismay. International experiences and our own thirty years experience in development certainly indicate that "motivation" of every villager to take an active part in the development process does depend upon how much the villager is informed, educated and communicated on development projects especially with the local projects meant for his development.
Rural information, education and communication programmes in support of local developmental operations and efforts to motivate villagers do not depend solely on mass media which a country can boast. However, even on this score we lag behind. Mass media are not the only avenues or channels of rural communication. Certainly, as you have experienced, there are scores of communication channels in a community or village other than these impersonal mass media. These include grassroots level interpersonal channels such as rural functionaries and opinion leaders, intermediaries, change agents and others in village who play a vital communicative role for local developmental projects and who are crucial in motivating villagers.

Information Need:

In most Blocks of Karnataka we have several developmental programmes and projects; some of them are centrally sponsored schemes such as, for instance, Drought Prone Area Programme, Command Area Development Programmes, Applied Nutrition Programmes; and some Karnataka Government Schemes, such as for instance Janata housing and development house site schemes, minor irrigation tanks schemes, scarcity relief etc. To give illustrations of specific projects at Block level, for instance we have in Jagalur Block (Chitradurga) scheme for diversification of huldi varieties, or in Shiggaon Block (Dharwar) we have specific projects as Intensive Cotton District Programme, under Megalaprabha project are, pilot project for nematode eradication in Melkote Block (Mysore); we have lesiting of multi, or in Davangere (Chitradurga) we have livestock production program. Innumerable examples of specific projects at Block level can be given.

As we all know, most of the innumerable actions on which rural development in Karnataka ultimately depends are actions by Block Development Officers, by communication personnel whose supportive services are available for the Block, and by individuals and groups in the village. In a democratic set up, the village based individuals' and groups' decision to take development action must be made by individual citizenry of Karnataka villagers on the basis of their knowledge of, understanding of, interest in, motivation for, and participation in specific development measures for their own improvement.

In order to provide a basis for these decisions by the villagers an adequate flow of information on development projects to the rural public is absolutely essential. No matter what channel you use — local broadcast facilities, mobile communication units, exhibitions, daily press or print medium for the literate villagers, or interpersonal channels as gramasevaks, extension agents and other functionaries in the village — we have to ensure free flow of development information to all the segments of populace in the villages of Karnataka.

Needless to point out, such information should not be restricted only "awareness information"; the information we should be disseminating are: on the project, development innovations, the service and inputs needed for adoption of innovations, and information to clarify the villagers doubts if any on the various components of the project.

Furthermore, it is also necessary that this rural information is alert to the realities of economic progress, programmes and needs of a block. The information task is to promote progress under existing limitations of supply of inputs and services by the Government of Karnataka. We should not attempt to awaken Karnataka villagers, desires that cannot be fulfilled on an orderly basis. It is then only the rural people will have the confidence and enthusiasm for the development project — a point which the Prime Minister has recently emphasised.
Key Questions:

Communication specialists have observed that a major course of relative failure, or at the least serious lag, in rural development projects has been traced to very deficient means of intensive information and communication to the communities, cadres and other definable groups of human beings whose decisions, attitudinal changes and behavioral actions are crucial. On the other hand, in designing and planning an effective information and communication support for any of the developmental projects in Karnataka, there are some key questions which we as communicators should ask ourselves.

a) What is the need to be met by the communication? Problems generally arise from two main types of origins. The first type of origin is the need for communication created by you or your Divisional Office or your own department or a Ministry which sits in Bangalore. Quite often it turns out that since you have to submit periodic reports of your activities, you create the need for communication and thus take your mobile communication unit to some villages and put up a show. The rural people may not be interested in the information type you supply, so you may have to first arouse their interest in the topic on which you want to communicate.

The other type of origin of communication need is that which arises from the people in the villages. They have a question, they have a doubt and a need for information on certain development operation which they are aware of. For instance, a group of farmers near Bagalkot may need information on soil testing. Here, there is a ready audience who are interested and seeking a specific type of information, so your talk is to disseminate information the village has explicit desired.

b) To whom are development information and messages to be communicated?

Let us define these whom as precisely as possible and then they are the "audience". Should it be only the target recipients of rural development projects? Or, should the "audience" also include Government Service Officers and project officials, so that we help all those in the official machinery to build up their knowledge about the project?

c) Having located our primary audience, what help do these groups of people need to implement a development operation?

d) What material resources or development inputs and services will be available in their own community or nearby, plus what the planned inputs say from the Block Development Office or other developmental offices in the district?

e) Let us not forget that development asks people not just to work or accept an innovation, but to take risks social, prestige, economic and so forth. So trust in development communication agent is essential. Then, what kind of person, with what background and what training will the development project community trust as the Communicators of these news ideas and techniques for rural development?

f) What communication goals should we be wanting to reach? We must determine just what we want the communication needs we will have earlier identified. Should the communication objective be teaching specific skills and as such instructional or should it be to provide a general education of rural people in terms of influencing their attitudes, stimulating their interest, motivating them to participate in the development project, or persuading them to take a specific action or to adopt innovations?
g) Communication analysis and planning for development operations involve trying to determine the best "entry point" in a village life cycle for new ideas and techniques. It also involves working out "entry point" to the village, so that our communication message percolate "critical path" for communication.

h) What are the obstacles to reaching communication objectives of a development project? Is it situational monetary, resources, communication material production and distribution, or dearth of effective communication messages.

Communication failures:

Quite often, for reasons unknown, planning communication support to rural development projects is neither done while the development project is being formulated nor coordinated with the growth of the project itself. Consequently, signs of failure in the project itself are noticed and very often the communicators are blamed. Let us take an actual example and see what position we could take. Hydro-electric dams and irrigation projects are common features in India, and as a matter of fact some of our well known hydro-electric dams are called "Modern Temples of India".

The project completion is often followed by periods of several years of relative stagnation of the investment - Because, no closely synchronised effort was made to inform the surrounding communities and prepare them to adjust their agricultural techniques to utilise the new waters and other resources, and even generally to ensure that they will feel that the project is for them.

Field Problems of Communication:

Having accepted that communication is an important factor in development operations, let me enumerate some of the field problems involved in giving an effective communication support to a developmental project. These problems can be broadly grouped into five categories.

a) First, is the problem of determining what combination of mass media and interpersonal channels of communication is ideally suitable for a particularly bound village.

b) Second, is the problem of ensuing mass media availability to the project information offices and accessibility to the people. Can a District Information or District Collectors office get radio time, do they have budget to produce radio programmes, can a block development office get an access to a porter printing machinery as silkscreen facilities or even to an ordinary mimeograph machine to duplicate routine communication materials or to produce a local weekly mimeographed newspapers.

c) Then we have the problem of maintenance of these mass media equipment. In how many offices can you find an out of order mimeograph machine, fused out film projector, not working radio sets or no stock of papers, ink or colour for poster making?

d) A crucial problems has been the production of communication material for media - such as material for radio, stuff for a local newspaper, ideas for poster etc. By communication materials I also mean audio-visual aids and other exhibition materials.
e) Finally, we have the problem of coordination with other aspects of the developmental operations. This requires a planned close-coordination of activities of all departments of concern to the project.

Priority Requirement in the Communication Support for a Development Operation:

One heartening development has been that more attention is given to planned growth of the overall natural mass communication infrastructure as integral elements of five years plans. A priority requirement in a communication support for a development operation is a first information education programme specifically addressed to the entire civil service involved in connection with the project. By priority, I mean quite literally before any mass communication, there should be adequate communication on the project within the civil service, if needed it should start even at the Cabinet and Secretaries level. For, if this crucial personnel structure, especially the subordinates or the field workers are inadequately informed as to the purpose, the natural need behind it, the specific objectives, phases, coordination and role of perhaps several departments, in implementation of a development operation, then rural mass communication over the heads of these largely uniformed civil servants will quite certainly fail. Let us ask ourselves, in how many developmental operations, the project information officer or a central information agency has first launched an internal extensive informational-orientation programmes exclusively for all these civil service cadre to be involved in a rural developmental operation implementation?