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Communication And Gaps Between Rural And Urban Change

By

P R R Sinha
Communication and Gaps between Rural and Urban Change

P.R.R. Sinha

Change is a law of nature. Every society does change over a period of time. In recent years, the countries of the Third World in particular had been witnessing a series of efforts made by both government and private agencies to bring about this change. However, the changes between rural and urban areas, for various reasons, have been widening instead of being bridged up.

What is intended here is not to discuss any type of change, but the change which is a desirable one, a change which is the result of planned effort on the part of the government and the private machinery. The present paper will be confined to this aspect of change only. Furthermore, while various means are being adopted to bridge the gaps as much as possible, I will confine my discussion to the role of communication in bridging this gap.

The question that comes to my mind at this stage refers to whether communication has led to the widening of the gaps between rural and urban areas, or has it succeeded in bridging the gaps between the two systems - rural and urban. This stems from the fact that observations and experiences in this regard has consistently revealed that not much attention is
being paid either by the newspapers or by broadcasting organisations to report news about rural life and living.

Content analyses of newspapers and radio and television programmes have indicated that little attention is paid to rural news and rural aspects of life. Hardly 10 per cent of newspaper space and of air-time is devoted to reporting developments and programmes for change.

Studies conducted all over the world, however, have highlighted positive relationships between communication and development. In fact, both of them are dovetailed to each other in a chicken and egg situation. It is very often difficult to find out which is cause and which is effect but nonetheless both of them feed on each other and are in a state of interdependent relationship - all the time all the way.

The issue is further complicated because readership of newspapers and ownership of radio and television are much more in urban areas than in rural areas for various reasons. In addition, the low rate of literacy in rural areas coupled with the low purchasing power of the people, has also led to widening of the gaps between the rural and urban areas.
Could we conclude, therefore, that communication has contributed very little by way of bridging the gaps between the rural and urban areas, and if at all it has done anything, it has succeeded in widening these gaps. There may be various factors for this state of affairs. Factors such as lack of proper aptitude and attitude of the communicators in general, and of the media practitioners in particular; preoccupation of the management with input-output relationship, that is to run the organisation on business principles; inadequate orientation of the media practitioners towards this kind of new role; predominant illiterate population and poor purchasing power. All these factors seem to have influenced a great deal in widening the gaps between rural and urban areas.

The question that looms large at this state is, to what extent communicators can plunge themselves into the act of bridging the gaps. Change as we know depends on a number of factors. To bring information to the doorstep of the people can only act as acatalyst, or as a motivator, and would not be all pervasive at any point in time. There are various other factors which go a long way towards bringing about a change, communication is only one of the means to achieve this end, not the only one.

Examples abound to indicate that communicators have created rising expectations among the people. But in the
absence of matching resources, these expectations have led to frustration, and finally to aggression and social tension. It is not implied, however, that communicators should not create rising expectations, because this is the beginning of the change process. If we want to have a change some sort of dissatisfaction has got to be created among the people. In other words, a desire for change has got to be created. An awareness has got to be created among the people for change. Once this stage is achieved, the people themselves would come forward and strive hard to better their lot by making the best use of the resources available at their disposal.

It is a delicate and challenging job for the communicators, because it is very often difficult for them to coordinate their efforts with other agencies which are also engaged in bringing about change. And, on the other hand, they cannot afford to be silent spectators to the whole drama of change by sitting on the fence as it were. In fact, the real solution lies not in sitting tight, but in making sincere efforts to bridge the gaps to the extent possible.

Different sources of communication are engaged in the process of creating awareness and interest among the people for change. More efforts have to be laid on rural areas than on urban areas if we want to bridge the gaps. It does
not imply that urban areas will not change if communicators pay less attention to them. But the fact that they come in constant touch with various other factors of change, would help them in bringing about changes as and when they deem fit. But concerted efforts have to be made especially in the rural areas so that the rural folks realise their responsibilities, realise the need for changing and make all possible efforts to improve their conditions considerably. This will necessarily result in bridging of the gaps.

While inter-personal communication has invariably been found effective than mass media communication in changing the attitude and values of the people, mass media have an enviable position in case of reaching the people in the nook and corner of the country. However, the limitation of time and money has always, and will always affect, or influence the total effectiveness of inter-personal sources of communication, like extension agents and development workers. The mass media on the other hand, have the distinct advantage of physical reach, but whether or not this is in congruence with the mental reach, is a question worth considering. It has been found out that mass media do not provide sufficient means of getting a feedback which affects adversely the desired effectiveness of the media specially in the context of change and development.
In recent years, in many Asian countries, due stress is being laid on integrated communication system. Some sort of media mix is also being attempted but the concept still seems to be diffused, mainly because of the nagging problems of coordination and integration of activities of different communication sources. It still remains a paper tiger for all intents and purposes. Nevertheless, the media organisations, both newspapers and broadcasts, have started laying more stress on the rural areas. There have been some sincere efforts in some Asian countries to develop viable rural press and to introduce more and more of rural news in the broadcasting organisations. These are healthy developments and indicate that inspite of various problems, the communicators have decided to play an important role in furthering the cause of growth, development and desirable change. This is very important especially in rural areas where scientific and technological innovations are being poured into at a breakneck speed. These innovations call for speedy and rational decisions on the part of the people. And, hence, it is incumbent on the communicators to provide the people with adequate and timely information so that the decision are rational for all practical purposes.

It is very hard to expect the communicators to play this new role overnight. It takes time to prepare oneself to perform this kind of a new role. It is very difficult to expect
the communicators to play this role of bridging the gap between the rural and urban areas without having proper orientation and training. It is through training that they will get a proper perspective of their new role expectations and job performance. If the training programmes are mounted on the basis of relevant research evidences, they will be much more effective in the field situations.

Research evidences will help a great deal in organising useful training programmes which will have a bearing on their job performance, and ultimately job satisfaction. Research findings will also help in proper planning and designing of the training programmes.

Needless to say that, at the root of the success of this new role is their mental acceptance and preparedness to act as change agents. It is a long way to go, there is no short cut to this, but if the reality of the situation prevailing in the Asian countries is any indicator, then there is no getting away from this new role. The sooner communicators start playing this role effectively, the better it would be for them and for the profession as a whole. Communicators are still reluctant to accept their role as change agents.
Some of the issues that ought to concern all of us would include:

1. Is it a fact that the gaps between rural and urban changes are widening? If so, to what extent is communication responsible for widening of gaps?

2. Can communication be geared to bridge the gaps between the rural and urban changes? If so, how?

3. Are communicators mentally prepared to play this new role? If yes, what are the practical problems they are likely to encounter in performing this function?

4. Do communicators consider themselves as change agents?

5. Can research help communication professionals play this role more effectively by providing sufficient information on the various facets of the gaps between rural and urban changes and the role of communication?

6. Is it practically feasible to organise different types of training programmes for communicators of different categories for their effectiveness in the profession?

7. If mass media and inter-personal sources of communication have limitations, and the idea of integrated communication system has been, by and large, a concept and a slogan, then is there any via media to overcome these problems?

8. Can group methods of communication provide useful clues to the effective functioning of communicators as change agents?
SONGCO, Ernesto I.

To understand the problems of broadcasters as change agents, the author first gives background information on the status, organisational set-up, manpower and programming in the Philippine radio broadcasting. To be effective agents of change, the broadcasters need a) to develop their communication skills, b) to be equipped with the right attitude and with an adequate knowledge level, c) to develop self-confidence, and d) to be knowledgeable about the target of their messages.