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Generating Support Of Entertainment Workers For Development Communication Programmes

By

Victor T Valbuena
GENERATING SUPPORT OF ENTERTAINMENT WORKERS FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION PROGRAMMES

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Entertainment workers can be tapped to contribute their share in promoting development-oriented programmes. And many are even willing to forego their usual astronomical fees to endorse what they believe to be socially-relevant programmes. Philippine development communication experience abounds with examples of successful enlistment of participation and support of producers, directors, scriptwriters and performers in such programmes as agricultural productivity, nutrition, maternal and child care, population and family planning, adolescent fertility, rural migration, and environmental protection and conservation.

The objective of this paper is to highlight some of these examples and illustrate how they have contributed significantly to the success of development IEC (information-education-communication) campaigns in the Philippines. A few of the examples are drawn from my own personal experiences in designing and implementing the communication components of some of the described development programmes.

Celebrity Testimonials

In the early 70's, while working with the Population Information and Education Office of the National Media Production Center in Manila, I was part of a team assigned to co-opt movie stars and other entertainment celebrities to endorse the country's population and family planning programme through print campaign materials - calendars, posters, magazine features. We did an informal survey of celebrities for their views on population and family planning and whether they would be willing to openly come out with these views in the media. We shortlisted some 25 celebrities - actors, singers, and basketball stars. (Yes, in the Philippines, basketball is big time entertainment!)

Our biggest hit was a poster-calendar featuring Nora Aunor, then the most popular actress-singer in the country. Ms. Aunor endorsed family planning and said something like she would opt for only three children to be able to give them a good future.
We printed an initial 30,000 copies for distribution. After a few weeks, our office was deluged with requests for more copies. We had to reprint 220,000 more copies to satisfy the demand. We knew that the picture of Nora Aunor was the main selling point of the material, but we also wanted to know if the message behind the picture got through to the recipients. It did.

Most of those polled said they believed what Ms. Aunor said and that they felt she was sincere in encouraging others to try family planning. They said they knew about Ms. Aunor's life — how she rose from selling water at the train station to help feed her large, poor family to become the biggest singer-actress in the Philippine entertainment world — and that she should know what she was talking about in the poster. An interesting finding was that many of the married women recipients pasted the material on the wall facing their beds, to remind them every evening either to take the pill or to mark the days on the rhythm calendar.

Ms. Aunor said she would waive her usual talent fee for endorsing products and programs, out of close friendship with one of our project colleagues who wrote her biography. Her manager convinced her to accept the honorarium offered by the project office, however. It was only six thousand pesos; way, way below what she would normally get for posing for a poster.

A few years later, Ms. Aunor did another poster-calendar for the Family Planning Organization of the Philippines, also for a minimal honorarium. The material had similar success as the first.

Another celebrity we used for a poster-calendar was Ms. Hilda Koronel, a young, respected dramatic actress. She believed in family planning, but she did not believe in child limitation. She was an only child and said that being alone was quite lonely. But she believed in child spacing for maternal and child health. That was the message she wanted to put across. The material registered moderate success, not quite like the Nora Aunor poster-calendar.

Ms. Koronel also initially refused to accept an honorarium from our office, saying that what she did was such a small thing for the country. Her manager urged her to accept one thousand pesos; good enough for a nice dress, she said.

Married actors, actresses and basketball stars and their spouses were also featured in several issues of a magazine called Pag-ibig (Love). The issues carried not only the family planning views of the celebrities, but also short stories with population-oriented themes, utility articles, and love and romance advice columns. We distributed the magazines free in some parts of the country and sold them in some. We wanted to test whether people would buy them even if they carried the name of the government publishing arm and were obviously about family planning. The sales could not cover production costs, but they were nonetheless
encouraging.

More recent examples of celebrities endorsing a development programme include Ms. Lea Salonga, who, before leaving for the London production of "Miss Saigon" did a school concert series for the Adolescent Fertility Programme of the Population Center Foundation, endorsing responsible sex and delayed marriage among teen-agers. She also cut two records on the same themes which were sold on the commercial market and which was also made a standard part of the concert. The concert series was sponsored by a soft drinks company.

In breastfeeding, actress-singer Ms. Jackie Lou Blanco also agreed to a media campaign showing her with her newborn child endorsing that "mother's milk is best". There was some initial hesitation to use Ms. Blanco in the campaign; detractors said that being an unmarried mother, she was not a suitable person to be spokesperson for such a campaign. However, the popular appeal of Ms. Blanco and her live-in partner, another actor, won in the end.

Perhaps, one of the best examples would be the appointment of Ms. Maria Elisa Anson-Roa as Member of the Board of the Commission on Population, representing the Mass and Entertainment Media, during the Marcos Regime. The post was not a paid, full time-job; it was mainly honorary.

Popularly known as Boots Anson, she was an accomplished stage, film and television actress who was also active in private life as a family planning motivator. She and her family had appeared in calendars, posters, magazine features, and broadcast programs endorsing family planning. The government thought she would be a good spokesman for the programme; and she proved them right. She spoke at public gatherings, conducted seminars for church groups, gave talks at factories, and encouraged her peers in the media industry to support the programme. She generated much media coverage and support for the programme.

What is significant is that people perceived her to be credible: she had a wholesome family life, was a practising family planner, was a respected figure in the industry, and was also awarded as one of the Ten Outstanding Women of the Nation in an annual national selection. She was, incidentally, one of the stars who consented to appear in the film Batingaw which is discussed later in the paper. Unfortunately, she relocated to the United States during the later part of the Marcos years.

Integration of Development Messages in Existing Broadcast Programmes

The University of the Philippines / Institute of Mass Communication Family Planning Communication Project in 1974-75 conducted a series of workshops on population and family planning IEC for media practitioners. The objective was to enlist the support of journalists, editors, producers, directors and
scriptwriters in integrating population-related messages in their media outputs. Several name directors in Philippine television participated in the workshops. Among the concrete results were the development of several episodes on such themes as delayed marriage, birth spacing, and family welfare on the highly popular TV family sitcom "John en Marsha".

This strategy of co-optation and integration was later pursued in the 80's by the Population Center Foundation, not through workshops but through direct negotiations with radio and TV producers, directors and scriptwriters. Again, the producer of "John en Marsha" agreed for some episodes to carry messages on population and family planning themes. The producer of "Lovingly Yours, Helen", a highly-rating radio-TV drama series also agreed to the same arrangement. The agreement was for the Population Center Foundation to provide the sitcom and the drama series scriptwriters with plot outlines (based on actual cases in family planning and adolescent fertility clinics) which they in turn could weave into the series.

Aside from drama programmes, the Population Center Foundation also co-opted musical variety shows to support population and health programmes. Shows with quiz portions were provided with data on the Philippine demographic and health situation for inclusion in quizzes. Show hosts of teen-oriented programs were requested to promote greater public use of adolescent fertility centers for sex education and sexuality counseling. Some of these compères included Ms. Tina Revilla, a popular TV host belonging to a family of celebrities and entertainers, and Mr. Raymond Lauchengco, a talented singer-actor who was then a college scholar at the UP Institute of Mass Communication.

This strategy was evaluated for effectiveness in carrying development-oriented messages. The findings indicted positive impact in changing peoples' attitudes about population and sexuality concepts, and in increasing public awareness and use of adolescent fertility clinics and counseling centers.

It is quite common now to hear and watch local broadcast entertainment programs with integrated development messages. Many producers, directors and writers have taken it upon themselves to carry on devcom support without much prodding from government as well as non-government development agencies.

Integration of DEVCOM Messages in Films

Some of the best Filipino films produced in the 50's and 60's were on social and development issues like the land problem, unionism, and the communist movement. It was in the 70's, however, when a more deliberate attempt was initiated to use local entertainment films to promote development programs.

A landmark was the making of Batingaw (literally, the sound of a church bell), in 1973-1974. A film on the theme of
love and responsible parenthood, it was a Ford Foundation-funded project of the Communication Foundation for Asia for World Population Year 1974.

"Two years in the making, with six major research studies and surveys to back it up, five name scriptwriters working on the screenplay, and four well-known directors lending a hand in the production, Batingaw marked a new frontier in Philippine film-making - and in development communication." (Maglalang, 1976.)

Since its premiere in 1974, "the film was seen by a million movie-goers during its commercial run and three million viewers over a multi-channel presentation. Other millions (would) see it, from Batanes to Jolo, (when it remade) the rounds in 16 mm under the auspices of the Population Commission". (Ibid.)

The impact of the film was evaluated by J. Walter Thompson, Philippines, an advertising firm, via a survey conducted in the major cities of Manila, Cebu, Iloilo and Davao. "Nearly all the respondents said they liked the movie. About half said they liked the family planning content, and a good number said they also liked the other "moral lessons" of the movie." (Ibid.)

"Despite...risks, Batingaw can be said to have fared fairly well. Not perhaps as well as it was projected to fare, but definitely better than it was expected to under the circumstances it was shown." These circumstances included extreme competition from karate and kung fu movies dominating the local movie scene at the time, and the fact that Batingaw was the first message movie of its kind done on a grand scale and thrown into the commercial movie market. From the outset, however, the effectiveness of the film was not envisioned to deal with the financial debits and credits. What was more important was the communication objective of the film. (Ibid.)

The film went on to win several awards in local and regional film festivals.

During the Marcos Regime, the annual Filipino Film Festival required that entries must carry messages on any of several development programmes of the government: population and family planning, land reform, rural migration, health and nutrition, etc. The top three festival winners were awarded incentive cash prizes to offset some production costs. Some excellent films dealing with the above issues were made during that time. With a good package of stars, director, marketing and government support, most of them made money at the tills. Whether they were effective in increasing public awareness of and support for the development programmes, however, is not very clear. No independent evaluation was carried out for this purpose.

On their own, some socially-conscious film-makers have made films that dissected the problem of land reform, urban congestion, deforestation and environmental degradation. Some made money. Many did not.
Other film-makers have entered into co-production ventures with government to make films with social messages. One such film was "Gisingin Mo Ang Unaga, Neneng" (Wake Up The Morning, Young Girl) a film co-produced by the Commission on Population with the multi-awarded writer-director Orlando Nadres. The story focused on two intertwined plots: an impoverished family's return to the provinces to start a new life on the farm, and a city doctor's decision to leave his urban practice to provide medical services to the rural areas. The film had the combination of a good story, popular but talented actors, and a respected director. The film had the right ingredients for an instant box office hit but it suffered from post-production delays, including overseas color processing, that by the time the film came out, interest created by earlier advertisements had waned. When the film was finally released, moviegoers thought it was already on its second run. And due to heavy bookings in the more prestigious theaters at the time, it had to settle for even limited runs in the second-rate moviehouses. If it was any consolation, the film was cited by many critics for its message and other production values.

DEVCOM in Folk/Popular Music

Folk singers have a tradition of social commentary in their music. In the Philippines, such artists as Asin, Heber Bartolome, Joey Ayala and Freddie Aguilar have composed numerous songs dealing with environment, population, and the conflict in Mindanao, the records of which sold exceedingly well in the commercial market.

The power of folk music in popular culture has not been lost on Philippine devcom programme implementors. Health and nutrition, population and family planning, and environmental agencies have contracted some of these artists to compose specifically for their programmes. The artists, many of whom are committed to the same issues, have agreed, provided that they are given the usual artistic freedom to develop the material. Some of the results are the popular "Buhay Pinoy" (the life of a Filipino) and "Awit ng Isang Ina" (song of a mother) by Heber Bartolome, which are used in population and health IBC efforts.

Earlier, mention was made of Ms. Lea Salonga cutting two records in support of an adolescent fertility and sexuality education programme. One of the records was with the "Menudo", a Puerto Rican teen-age singing group popular in the Philippines and the Spanish-speaking regions in the Americas. These records sold very well in the commercial market. To what extent they influenced restrained sexual behaviour among the young, however, is vague. But they proved effective in generating discussion about responsible teenage fertility behaviour during school and adolescent center seminars and workshops.

Some producers, directors and writers, also realizing the potential commercial appeal of the musical drama, have made devcomzarzuelas for both stage and television without much
government assistance. Some outstanding examples are Ang Bagong Pilipina, a stage zarzuela on women's rights and development (thus the title, "The New Filipina"); Pamilya Dimasupil, Walang Makapipigil (The Unconquerable Family, No One Can Restrain Them), a musical comedy on family planning; and Ang Binhi (The Seed), a TV zarzuela on family welfare and children's rights. These musical dramas starred popular singers and were very well received by audiences.

Enlisting Support

In the Philippines, very few producers, directors, writers and performers would volunteer their support for development programmes. Not because they do not believe in the programmes, but mainly because they really do not know how they could help. Once the way is shown to them, they are easily motivated and/or persuaded to lend their talent to the cause being espoused.

These workers in the entertainment industry are not only artists; they are also pragmatic individuals who see an advantage in supporting development concerns. The talent fees and/or honoraria offered to them are of little consequence in many instances. For the actors, it means positive publicity to be identified with a socially-relevant cause. It also means an opportunity to act in challenging dramatic roles. Some of the roles in a number of Filipino devcom-oriented films have won awards for their performers. To a greater or lesser degree, the producers, directors and writers also derive the benefit of enhanced image of their programmes being identified with social causes.

For the producers who enter into co-production ventures, there is the very real advantage of shared costs. In the case of government-assisted film projects, there is the added advantage of completely waived or reduced duties on imported raw stock. For the actors and directors in these co-produced projects, there is the more widespread exposure of their works across the country; these films are usually reprinted in 16 mm copies and distributed after their commercial run to government mobile units deployed all over the islands.

My own personal experiences in working with media entertainment workers have been very positive. These persons are usually ready to help. But we need to tell in very clear terms what we expect of them, how they can actualize these expectations, and what mutual benefits we can derive from cooperation.

Reference cited: