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<th>Bangladesh report : communicator as change agent</th>
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Bangladesh Report: Communicator As Change Agent

By

A Toab Khan
Bangladesh with more than 80 million people is the eighth largest country in terms of population. About 90 per cent of the people live in village areas and 80 per cent of them are engaged in agriculture. Per capita income is less than US$100 (Tk. 1315/-) which is one of the lowest in the world. Of the total labour force whether in city or in village, 36 per cent are underemployed or unemployed. Thus the total number of unemployed comes to about 10 million. The average per capita food consumption is low and per capita caloric intake is 1,800 per day which is far below the minimum required.

Food production during the 1960's increased at an annual average rate of 2 per cent but lagged behind the population growth of 3 per cent per annum. Density of population per square mile is more than 1,500 and would attain a peak even on optimistic assumption by the turn of the century. The average size of a land holding is little less than 2.5 acres per farm family. Agriculture operation is carried on small holdings and mostly at subsistence level. But farmers are
responsive to modernisation, if attracted by new incentives. The number of landless labourers is estimated to be around 45 per cent of the rural population. There are 22.5 million acres of land under cultivation. The average cropping intensity is around 147 per cent. Of the total land under rice cultivation HYV is raised in 13% of the land. The average yield per acre in HYV area is about one ton of clear rice whereas yield per acre of the local variety is only about 0.4 tons. The Productivity level is low and 0.40 acres of land produce only 1,335 pounds of paddy.

The agricultural sector provides the basic economic opportunities. It absorbs about 78 per cent of the total labour force and about 84 per cent of the total rural labour force. About 75 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product originates from this sector.

The sheer number of the poor in the developing countries especially in my own country, Bangladesh, is sufficient reason for believing that programmes consisting of new welfare projects could have no perceptible impact on poverty and other related malaise afflicting the country. This implies that fight for the removal of poverty should be the major objective of the overall development strategy and should constitute the main thrust of such efforts. In other words,
unless the large masses of small and marginal farmers, landless peasants and impoverished artisans are considered as a national resource from the stand point of capital formation and increased productivity, benefit of the growth, even if it is achieved to some extent, will continue to bypass the majority of the population. The main task of the development as a whole and especially of rural development should be to bring this silent or passive majority into the main stream of economic growth and social progress.

The wide discrepancies between previous intentions and past performance in designing rural development projects have been primarily due to two reasons:- (1) inability to design appropriate institutions and (2) due to lack of commitment at the top.

A rural development programme would have two essential objectives: (1) to increase the productivity of rural poor and (2) ensure their full participation in planning and executing the programme. Successful implementation of such a programme requires - (1) careful selection of areas for project location (2) identification of the largest group of beneficiaries (3) careful consideration regarding the sequencing and phasing of activities and (4) identification of appropriate institutions/organisations, services and communication input to support the programme.
Communities are able to participate in programmes through institutions and therefore, it is imperative that such institutions should be discovered or created which shall serve as forums of participation. But it is often found that the existing or newly created institutions have dissimilar interest and are in contradiction to one another. It is also often found that such institutions only reflect the aspiration of the dominant and powerful section to the neglect of the overwhelming majority and the poor.

So institutional change is also imperative for effective rural development. The kind of institutional changes considered, encompassed land reform reallocation of water rights, social services, modification of agricultural support system, creation of forums for local participation in decision making.

The history of institution building and community participation effort in Bangladesh is long and sad. The two-tier Comilla approach was the first among a series of discoveries made between the early 60's and mid 70's. The institutions that were evolved in Comilla grew out of an examination of past failures in the rural development. The spirit of self-reliance through internal generation of capital (financial and human) gave it a distinctive feature.
This would provide a basis for self-sustaining increases in income and productivity, thereby, raising the general welfare of the rural people. The emphasis was on increasing agricultural production, but other welfare aspects like adult education, literacy campaign and women programmes were not altogether left out. For a time, it did promote the attainment of the limited objectives it set forth, agricultural production did increase substantially while at the same time ensuring that smaller farmers participated fully. But recently a workshop finding pointed out that "it was in all probability inevitable however that sooner or later the realities of rural class structure would make themselves felt at both village and national levels and result in the same domination by a class of Kulaks. And it seems this is what happened." The intention was noble but concepts and assumptions upon which the institutions were built were filmsy. 'Groups' were loosely identified and therefore a major part of the rural community - the small and landless farmers did not directly benefit from the programme.

It was after the Liberation that the Comilla Programme was considered fit for replication; and it was through the auspices of Integrated Rural Development Programme that the Comilla model was developed on a nationwide basis. Thereafter other aspects of rural problems were incorporated into the model, notably, the inclusion of population planning and rural women cooperative pilot projects in 1975. Nevertheless the basic
problems remained, which intensified in course of time.
So another innovation was fielded, the Total Village
Development Programme (TVDP)

This broadened form of the Comilla approach constituted
a truly integrated approach to rural development.

Experience in the rural development efforts shows that we
have created, established or remodelled many organisations and
institutions for this purpose. It started with the famous
Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) in Comilla
and spread to Mother's Clubs in cities and villages. At
present, besides the (IRDP), Womens Rehabilitation and
Welfare Foundation, Social Welfare Department, Mother's Clubs
etc. 300 other voluntary organisations are working in the
field. Their field of activities may vary from child care,
population planning to economic development, but each and
everyone is trying to do something towards the betterment
of the people of Bangladesh. Most of these organisations
and institutions except the family planning sector lack proper
communication support. Their development projects are not
always backed by proper communication planning.

Development in its totality is a type of social change
in which new ideas are introduced into the social system in
order to produce higher per capita incomes and levels of living
through more modern methods and improved social organisations
and equitable distribution of such social benefits.
Communication - traditional and mass media help tremendously in changing people's attitude in favour of developmental efforts.

The flow of new ideas in rural Bangladesh is infrequent and few and also is the presence of proselytising agencies. It is agreed by all that it will require a long time and tremendous effort to convey promptly and on a regular basis vital information essential for development to 64 thousand villages in Bangladesh. It is a common belief in Bangladesh that the only communication materials that reach the villages are election posters and cigarette advertisements. Communication materials supporting development projects are seldom seen. This may lead to the assumption that there is lack of locally designed audio-visual materials in the country which of course is not true. A recent survey of UNICEF, Dacca, shows, there are at least 500 locally designed audio-visual materials to support development in Bangladesh, most of these have been designed in recent years. It is more the failure of the distribution system. Either the communication policy or the distribution system of communication material will fail to reach the target audience.

Comilla Approach of Communication

While he directed the Comilla Academy, Dr. Akhter Hamid Khan was fond of using the phrase "priming the pump". He was
the man who took the responsibility for priming the "local pumps of rural development" in Comilla, which, once started, would generate local action and participation. Dr. Khan had clearly set out a number of interrelated ideas and principles on rural development. Whenever he went out to the villages, he talked about these ideas in very simple terms, using rural analogies. To quote Dr. Rahim of East-West Communication Institute, Hawaii "initially, the communication in Comilla was from the top down". It was essential to prime the pumps, so that self-sustaining local action could be generated.

The importance of top-down communication should be judged from the point that it is necessary to start the engine of local initiative and action. Experiences of China and Tanzania also prove the same point. The medium and channel of major communication activities in Comilla was mostly interpersonal backed by, to some extent, the print medium - mostly books. Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC) was the centre of training new leaders for rural development. The nerve centre of the Comilla movement was the weekly village meeting and the weekly TTDC training class. Women, Youth and Imams (religious leaders) were used for this purpose. The Imams were trained as teachers to adults and children. The weekly village meeting created group cohesion, the TTDC training class gave constant impetus. With the formation of groups, the scope for managerial and technical skill expanded. The managers and model formers
were carriers of new activism. They were emergent new leaders. At the same time the services of Imams were obtained through training and remunerations. In the olden days they were both spiritual and secular teachers. But two hundred years of British rule deprived them of their secular role. Gradually they became confined to religious rituals and the confinement made them obscurant. They opposed all reforms, progressive measures and innovation as foreign evils. As the villagers remained deeply religious, the obscurantism of the Imams caused national schizophrenia. It was essential to involve them in the development process and use their services for communicating the new ideas. As soon as an integral teaching function was assigned to them, their response was positive. According to Dr. Chowdhury Inayetullah, development administration expert at the Asia Centre for Development Administration in Kuala Lumpur "the most crucial factor" for the success of Comilla approach "was the personality of Dr. Akhter Hamid Khan". It proves that the concept of interpersonal communication was the main factor behind the success of Comilla.

**Extension worker as Development Communicator**

The extension workers in the government services of the sub-continent are perhaps the lowest level link between the Government and the people. Perhaps the oldest and most common approach of rural development communication in the less
developed countries is the extension service for the dissemination of useful and practical information on agriculture, nutrition, health, family planning. The rationale of this approach is that there is a growing body of practical knowledge available from scientific and technical research that can be extended to the individual rural families to help them improve their output and welfare. The assumptions underlying this approach are that the rural families are interested in receiving new information and that they have the necessary supporting resources or can procure them in order to apply the new information in useful activities.

In general, extension services in developing countries are offered by different departments of the government bureaucratic organisations. Theoretically the extension workers visit the villages, arrange demonstrations of improved practices to individual farmers. They are to send regular reports to their departments if the condition is serious in respect of drought, flood or epidemic. But in the community development approach which is also in operation in Bangladesh, the multipurpose village level worker is the key communicator. The extension and community development approach of communication has no direct political role or function, and this is the major drawback in the approach as mass poverty cannot be removed from society without total socio-economic-political commitment.
In Bangladesh we do not have the main extension network. This consists of some 4,000 extension workers (Union Agricultural Assistants) backed by the Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC). Though the Comilla Academy which is under Dr. Akhtar Hamid Khan does not rely on government extension workers it has become a necessity for the diffusion of ideas, transfer of skills for improvement, feedback to stimulate changes for the better. In some fields Bangladesh has an impressive number of field personnel for such jobs. This is true especially for the family planning and agriculture sectors. But again we get two different types of picture from agriculture and family planning.

According to a survey report by a Bangladesh newspaper, the extension services for farmers in the rural areas are alarmingly inadequate. Union Agriculture Assistants (UAA) are the only development officers posted at the grassroots level. Their training includes a secondary school certificate and perhaps some training at the Agricultural Extension Training Institute. They are each responsible for the agricultural output of over 5,000 acres and for some 1,700 farm families. Farmers report seeing their UAA less than twice a year. At the Thana level there is a wide variety of agricultural personnel but their actual training is not much better than the UAA and ability to reach farmers is probably less.
The communication support provided for the agricultural development by various agencies of the government including Agricultural Information Service includes the services of mass communication media. There are regular "Farm Broadcasting" from Radio Bangladesh; occasional TV programmes which are mostly talks by selected experts; films shows in the rural areas on how to improve agricultural production, publication of books, booklets and journals and poster campaigns. But the newspapers and news agencies are not properly fed and their services are not properly utilised. There is a plan to publish wall newspapers in some selected rural areas within the next six months. Nature of these communication materials of Agricultural Information Service are mostly "how to do it" in nature and target audience are both the farmers and extension workers. The government proposes to establish a new extension service with ultimately 16,000 village extension agents (VEA) and 7,500 of whom will be posted during the current development plan period. Another project is being executed in Rajashahi Division which is called V&T - visit and training. Under this project there will be a large number of contract farmers and for 100 contract farmers there will be one extension worker. This pilot project is being executed for the better performance of extension workers.

It is very clear from the present state of affairs that extension workers - Union Agricultural Assistants (UAA) working
in the lowest level of the administrative set-up cannot function as change agents in the rural areas.

Though personal channels are more effective than mass media in motivating, campaigns relating to aspects of national development, the UAA are not the people who can do that job. We will have to look at the other sources for this purpose.

Mass Media as Change Agent

The mass media can play a dominant role in the communication approach to rural development, by delivering information messages flow from a centralised organisation managed by professional communicators. Radio is without doubt the most effective and powerful medium by which developing nations can motivate the people to work for national development. As a newly independent country Bangladesh recently embarked on development planning whose success will depend a great deal upon proper and effective use of mass media especially the radio for this purpose. Radio communication is available to all parts of Bangladesh.

The Radio Bangladesh programmes which are beamed to the farmers of the country include instructions about agriculture methods, animal husbandry, forest management, family planning,
nutrition and many other subjects. With 2.8 million sets in the country radio plays an important role. Above all, the strong community listening habits of the people is a good sign for the community communication approach.

Bangladesh Television also does not lag behind in catering government development projects to the people. Though TV has 5 new relay stations in the country, the total number of sets are 60,000.

Press: Change Agent - Rights and Responsibility

The story of the print medium especially the newspapers are a little different as it belongs to the private sector, though three newspapers are owned by the Government. Again the newspapers as a whole had a long tradition of fighting for the freedom of the Press. Although the Press is conscious about its responsibility and duty to the society, the hesitations are there. They are of firm view that the issue concerning the rights of the Press must be settled first, before any other role assigned to them including the role of change agent. They say that the experience of the past has not been very bright. Newspapers of Bangladesh had to carry many responsibilities even sometimes without any rights.
Whenever, newsmen had a little bit of freedom it was with so many ifs and buts. It came as a gratis, not as a right. Except for a brief period in 1972 newspapers did not have the right to communicate and access to information sources stipulated in the Constitution. Constitutional guarantee of freedom of the Press continued till the promulgation of emergency in 1974 and closure of newspapers in June, 1975. But the entire process of degeneration started in January, 1973 when the most arrogant expression of totalitarian mentality was reflected in the removal of the two journalists from jobs.

I don't like to give here a chronology of the rise and fall of Press freedom, but it should be noted that two major factors still predominate as obstacles in the path of Press freedom:

1. Media ownership pattern

Today some major newspapers are owned by the Government. Since the Government is the major source of advertisement, it has created a new pattern. In this pattern Constitutional guarantee for Press Freedom is almost meaningless unless deliberate steps are taken to balance the pattern.
In developing countries, newspapers are born in idealism and live in frustration. Most of them die in frustration. Most stories of newspapers in developing countries do not end happily. But even then newspapers are very important in the pattern.

According to Dr. Wilbur Schramm - "It is perhaps too obvious to say that in a growing country information must flow. The flow of technical and political information must be greatly increased before the country can move forward. The leaders must speak to the people and people to the leaders."

Among the mass media, newspapers have an unequalled ability to be the people's medium, the people's voice.

If the Press is free the newspapers can represent the viewpoint more effectively.

But even in a Press subordinate to the Government, again to quote Dr. Schramm, there is still opportunity for letters to the editor, for leaders of more than one persuasion to be quoted, and for the needs and problems of individual sections of the country to be reported.
The press in a developing country has a special ability to speak for the people and report their needs and can work as change agents.

Dr. Schramm says, the Press must carry, interpret, even propagandise the Government development plan to the people, because the future of the nation hinges on the success of the plan.

The mass media in a developing country performs the role of a facilitating agent in promoting national development. In the developing countries of Asia and Africa, the mass media including newspapers are increasingly looked upon not only as an instrument for political control but also as a major tool in implementing development plans. The media too play a crucial role in various aspects of the nation building process. The Bangladesh Press together with the others perform these responsibilities.

The use of media by the Government is not a new phenomenon. Churchill used radio during World War II.

Newspapers have many responsibilities and definitely they will bear it, but not without freedom. Freedom comes first then we can talk about responsibility. Without freedom the responsibility is nothing but shackle which must be destroyed.
Transnational in interpersonal communication

The destruction caused by the war of liberation and worsening of the economic condition in the years following the war have attracted many foreign agencies to work for the welfare of various population groups. According to one estimate, their number is reported to be more than four hundred. Another report puts the number at about 136. The functions of all these agencies are not well known. Because of the lack of appropriate records their exact coverage in terms of geographic areas or of target groups cannot be estimated. But these organisations are functioning throughout Bangladesh. Thousands of their workers who are paid a good salary and remuneration tell the people day in and day out what is good for them. In other words they are also engaged in some form of interpersonal communication at the national level. Although they rely mostly on interpersonal communication they do not lack mass media support. If necessary they use their own printed material to back their efforts.

But who are they, why are they still in our country even after eight years of Liberation. According to the survey by the Foundation for Research on Educational Planning and Development (FREPD), these agencies found an opportunity during the postwar period to introduce some programmes of welfare and development.
It appears that many agencies which originally came for providing relief after the war eventually transformed their activities into community development programmes.

However the following questions remain unanswered -
What type of messages are these people communicating throughout the country and what is the necessity for that? Is it another form of transnational operation on an interpersonal communication level?

Conclusion

Development Communication tends to be discussed in terms of a total programme of social change. Unlocking local energies is parallel to the change in priorities toward rural development. But local communication cannot be done with conventional mass media thinking which emphasises a one way communication and generalised messages. It must include a strong component of social organisation and interpersonal communication.

The fundamental question still remains:
Who
Makes what Development Planning?
For whose benefit?
Faces what problems?
Gets what results?
How and why?