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THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF THE POOR IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

Researched and Presented by Ms Upala Devi Banerjee (Program Officer, Asian Network of Women in Communication, New Delhi, India)

The South Asian part of Asia has the largest concentration of poor amongst all the continents of the world. All this poverty is mostly centered in the rural areas of the seven South Asian countries. In this context, the role of rural development assumes special significance. This concern has led to the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1976 to adopt a definition of rural development as a "productive programme against poverty crossing all sectors". However, any development programme, to be successful, depends on the effective communication of objectives, tasks and skills among the participants and the implementing agencies. It has been increasingly seen and felt that many of the weaknesses of the rural development programmes initiated all over the world are ascribed to the poor participation of the beneficiaries --- in this context, the rural poor. The participation is dependent on the acceptance of the programmes/projects by the beneficiaries, which in turn, depends upon the perceptions of the rural poor regarding the balance of likely gains to them and efforts that they will have to put in.

To create a favourable climate for the involvement of the rural poor, effective communication links between the initiators and the would-be participants have to be forged and strengthened on a continuing basis. This, in brief, is the core of development communication.

In this paper, I will explore how development communication fosters grassroots participation amongst the rural poor of South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Pakistan and Maldives) in achieving a level of development. I would also define communication as a two-way dynamic process of transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc. through the use of alternative symbols --- words, pictures, figures, etc. In the development context, if the communication is to succeed, it must provide for feedbacks. Furthermore, the messages must activate the beneficiaries to action. To fulfil these conditions, the communication must be one to one, many to one and many to many. The prolific growth of mass communication in contemporary times emphasizes only "one to many" aspects. The situation at the receiver's end is inadequately explored. The result is that the poor are at crossroads regarding what they are expected and not expected to do. The role of development participation is to ensure both individual and collective participation. Only then is an individual member likely to be heard.

Clarity of content and the form in which it is transmitted is vital to the success of development communication. The rural poor judges and evaluated the messages in terms of their own world
view and experiences. Hence, the language and idiom of their messages are quite important. While indulging in development communication, the cultural values, attitudes and behavioural modes of the poor need to be respected. The experiences of the peer group is far more relevant to the poor than the idealistic benefits of a given development programme. They must see, before they believe and act.

At times, new activities and programmes carried out may pose risks and threats to the accepted life of the poor. The development communicator must therefore ensure as to who bears the risks of failure. The implicit assumptions of the traditional rural development programmes that the knowledge and decisions are the responsibility of the agencies while risks are to be borne by the poor is unlikely to bring forth any development.

Moreover, development communication must lead to action which is participation. If this is to happen, the communicator must be trustworthy. This trust can be fostered if equality is guaranteed in the communication system. This equality need not be treated in terms of income or status. But, it has been seen that people enjoying higher status and position in the socio-economic structure have greater command over communication channels and thereby receive new information earlier than disadvantaged people. Though exposure to development communication augments grassroots participation independent of stratification, it remains to be noted that other channels of communication, particularly media exposure and education, do not stimulate development participation independent from social hierarchies. Urban contact seems to be the only channel in the category of general communication that tends to have some bearing on development participation, independent of stratification. This is all the more prevalent in the South Asian countries.

That the peoples' participation in development is of crucial importance for the success of any development programme, more so of a rural development programme, can be gauged from a few successful experiments made in development communication in the five South Asian countries. Due to time constraints, I will discuss only two out of quite a few which have been carried out.

Development Programme Among Harijans in India: It is well-known that in India, there are communities stigmatized by the bane of untouchability. Their upliftment has been the concern of the successive governments and many programmes have been taken up, including the recently started Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) for helping the poorest of the poor to raise their living standards. There are isolated cases of success in an otherwise depressing picture of the failure of the official sponsored programmes. One of these is the
Mhaisal experiment. About 20 years ago, Shri Deval, a devoted social worker, surveyed the plight of Harijans (untouchables) in Mhaisal village in Maharashtra. These 50 families were leading a life of mortgaged landless labourers, toiling on others’ fields.

With the help of a few charitable trusts, Shri Deval managed to release their mortgages, taught them modern methods of cultivation and established a cooperative farm, run and managed by the Harijans themselves. Dairy animals were given to individuals and milk collection was linked to the government-sponsored diary. Within ten years, the participants were able to raise their production levels.

Unfortunately, this success did not evoke any response from the disadvantaged communities in the district or elsewhere in the State. Efforts made through verbal communications to groups in different villages by social workers fell on deaf ears. Their limited view of the world, centuries of wretched living and limited resources led them to believe that such success can never be achieved by them. Hence, Shri Deval took a few villagers from these villages and made them interact with the Harijans of Mhaisal village. There was an interaction (development participation and communication) among the natives and the outsiders, wherein all the difficulties, obstacles and hurdles were discussed. As these discussions were among the peer groups, this helped to establish a rapport and a feeling of sincere equality between the “sender” and the “receiver”. The villagers went back to their own villages and began undertaking development programmes with confidence.

Moreover, a slide-set with synchronized cassette commentary highlighting the “before” and “after” situations and the problems encountered was prepared. Exhibition of the audio-visual to groups of 20/25 villagers set in motion the interactive communicative process. Since the slide set has been prepared recently, its impact on the villagers are yet to be known, but hopefully, the results will be positive.

Community Participation in Education in IRD Programmes in Nepal:

Ever since the initiation of the Village Development Programme in 1952, community participation in rural development activities has been increasingly recognized in Nepal. Along with other programmes, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was introduced in 1976. An IRDP would have the participation of village and district-level governments in setting priorities, determining objectives and allocating local resources.

The first IRDP which covered the two districts of Rasuwa and Nuwakot, though including vital sectors of development, did not have education as one of its major components. It was however
realised that education could not be seen in isolation from the developmental process and hence, after two years, education was also added to the project.

Resources, though small, has been allotted to provisions for school infrastructure, providing scholarships to students, training to teachers and establishing trade schools. For the purposes of ensuring increased participation in education of women and underprivileged groups, special programmes were formulated. In fact, communities will now be playing a significant role in educational programmes under IRDP.

The IRDP education programme under progress now includes building local institutions for planning, implementation and sustenance as one of its major strategies. It envisages the Small Farmer Groups and User Committee to be the two important institutional mechanisms for the participation of the people in the allocation and management of resources and sharing of project benefits. Each village-level government is to have several Small Farmers Group which will serve as the main vehicle for the socio-economic development of the poor in the area. The group for education will be using such incentives for participation in development activities as providing clothes to female children who go to school. A User Committee’s membership is to be limited exclusively to the representatives chosen from amongst the users themselves. The Committee would be responsible for undertaking and managing infrastructure projects such as school buildings.

An Overview: The task of ensuring involvement and participation of the targeted beneficiaries in rural development is admittedly a difficult, time-consuming and a costly affair. It requires a multi-disciplinary approach for preparing the content of the messages, the forms in which they are to be delivered, evaluation of the feedbacks of the receivers and subsequent modifications in the contents and forms. Development communication has to activate the target group in mobilising their own resources, supplemented through external sources to raise their own standards of living. Moreover, communication is to ensure that change is within the reach of the target group. Past experiences has shown that public facilities are used mostly by the better-off segments of society. Only when this barrier is broken down by communication and validated through experience can participation in all its aspects likely to come forth.

Moreover, development communication is only one part of the total development programme. In order to communicate, some tangible successes have to exist. These successes need to be analysed in terms of organisation, institutions, legal framework, techniques, accountability and cultural mores. The failure cases also have to be analysed and woven in the communication messages. These are some of the areas for future research.
Moreover, people's participation cannot be limited to the work of voluntary agencies only. It has to be evidenced at the beneficiary level for the success of any rural development project. Rousing of participation at this level and at the envisaged intensity cannot be institutionalised overnight, nor can it be obtained by legislation. In India, we are aware of the failure of the local-self governments (Panchayati Raj) with elected bodies in creating a development thrust in rural areas. Development can be attained through experimentation, trial and error on the part of development agencies including credit agencies. At this stage, even an awareness of the problem and limited efforts to solve it at the local levels may lead to the formulation of durable solutions. A more durable solution would evolve out of a sympathetic thinking process, the main elements of which would be:

i) assessment of power and commitment of the groups,

ii) an in-depth study of inter-organisational relationship and relationships within a single organisation,

iii) programme monitoring and evaluation,

iv) advocacy and networking, and

v) capacity-building of the programmes or organisations implementing the programmes.

It is my submission that through an analysis of these elements in the participation process and weaving these in development communication, a workable and stable model for people's participation in rural development programmes would emerge.