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Communication And Change In Indonesia:
An Overview

By

Alwi Dahlan
Change in Indonesia is always related to national development, especially to economic development. Nowadays we also include in a discussion of economic development, social and cultural development processes. We thus talk of the development of the total Indonesian man, and ways of achieving this.

There are three main goals for development in Indonesia. The first goal is sustained and rapid economic growth. The second is equitability, i.e. the equitable growth of income among the population, to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. And the third is television.

We want economic growth; we want equitability, but we don't want them without stability. We want a stable society; we do not want growth to be accompanied by cultural shocks or social upheavals. These three principles combined are very difficult to formulate and implement. Development and change embrace so many facets of growth. For instance, economic growth implies not only agricultural but also industrial development. Again, development is concerned with the quantitative aspects, for example, the increase in income, but also the qualitative aspects — that everybody should have a basic minimum education, enough food, good health and so on.
What problems do we face in using communication to achieve development and change?

One of the big problems is that development itself is complex, so that various sectors need to be developed simultaneously. You cannot just develop the textile sector, the financial sector or the agricultural sector alone without involving the others as well. You have to develop both the physical and the non-physical sectors.

For instance, in Indonesia, you have construction projects, but you also have religious projects, like distribution of the Quran to schools in the villages and the building of mosques. All these are funded by the government, to give people something they can hold on to. We in Indonesia believe that you can be rich but if you are not happy, you are not successful. It must also be remembered that in our concept, development must be continuous. We want sustained development; that means that development in one sector should not be achieved at the expense of growth in another. Thus, if you want to get income from timber and you cut down the trees in the forests, you also have to develop the forests.

So we have what we call development-via-preservation of forests. That is why the office of the Ministry of Environment also handles development and preservation of forests. From April 1983, my ministry will have a
population development and environment office, to reflect the growing awareness of the relationship between man and his environment.

This is the developmental strategy, but we also see problems in reconciling values, if development is to succeed. Modernisation must be designed with a precise time-frame and at the same time must accommodate traditional values that may resist planned changes. Some traditional values may not emphasise the need to complete a job within a certain period of time. That is not to say, however, that traditional values are totally so. Take the case of Salat — the five daily prayers that a Muslim must perform. Each must be completed within a certain time-frame.

We want to keep the old values, but some of these are not compatible with the needs of development. So, while we try to make use of the old values to support development, we also have to fight against those which actually resist development. One consequence of this is that sometimes desirable traditional values disappear along with the not-so-desirable ones.

Take village construction and development projects and family planning: Everybody in the village must come at a particular time to help in building a house. All the men are assembled and they are given these talks and told how important family planning is. Meanwhile, all the ladies are
brought to the back of the house, one by one. These people who were managing this programme were so enthusiastic that they forgot that there are certain ways, certain values to observe.

Another challenge to development and communications comes from geographic factors. Indonesia is a big country and about 70 million people are scattered in villages in many islands. You have to reach all of them before you can pass on developmental messages.

Access to media is another problem area, as also the existence of 40 or more local languages spoken by people with differing information needs. If you don't have a certain type of TV set, you cannot watch television and understand the message.

There is also the problem of 'communication cultures'. Television actually creates different communication cultures. Although Indonesia has one national language, we have over 40 different local languages. This may have different and liberal interpretations in different parts of the country.

It is important for people to have access to information media, whether they are living in urban centres
or in isolated islands. There should also be enough content: more types of information to be distributed all over the country. The thinking was also to have a linkage between formal media and the new social networks.

Indonesia has the basic communications infrastructure. The domestic satellite was launched in 1978 and we conducted experiments with satellites. However, we did not conduct any experiment in communicating with people. We were merely trying to reach them. Thus, the software development has not grown at the same pace as hardware development.

The satellite originally was launched for telecommunications to enable economic information to flow freely. But subsequently, it was found that satellites can also be used for radio and television broadcasting. Now, the television infrastructure covers the whole country. Within five years, we have 250 ground stations and more than 400 relay stations covering the whole country. To provide real access to media we distributed public television sets free to the remote villages. Within five years, there were 2 1/2 million private sets in Indonesia. Radio broadcasts are more localised, now with more local radio stations being installed in every sub-province.
The big newspapers in Indonesia also print special editions with localised news — perhaps not daily but in weekly editions; and they are partially supported by the government. We have also expanded our government information and essential services network. The formal communication network and the information specialists working in them are now equipped with quite modern technology. The specialist has a motor cycle or boat if he is in a remote island. The boat is equipped with radio, television video sets and recorders to enable him to monitor Jakarta's transmissions which can guide him. He can also at any time show the people audiovisual materials.

When people see these materials, they tend to become active participants in the change process. For example, when somebody becomes a family planning acceptor, the television people go to and record this event. And they are proud to become a status symbol. That is to my mind a very surprising attitudinal change. Ten years ago we didn't talk about family planning, but now we are proud to say that we are very advanced in family planning. This is a very gratifying change. When the video image of the acceptor is shown on the monitor to other villages, we actually help to expand the capabilities of the specialists.

Almost all important sectors have their own specialists now. Previously we had only agricultural specialists but now we also have extension specialists for fisheries, cattle, livestock breeding, for family planning, and all
sorts of things. As mentioned earlier, the formal communication structure must be linked with the non-communication structure.

So we have to identify the local informal leaders, invite them many times and show them various films and other materials. And of course we try also to stimulate the traditional communication media. About 20 per cent of the television programmes from Jakarta are on the traditional folk arts and with more than 30 ethnic groups, we have no shortage of material. Before we finish with one, we keep getting new material. As Dr. Muis' study has shown, traditional arts from the various regions are the most popular shows for the villagers. It is more popular than American serials, because for the first time the villagers know that somebody else in Indonesia knows and enjoys the same show, and this helps very much in national integration.

The attitudinal described change so far has been created not only communication but by the total development effort. People can now afford TV sets and radio-cassette players which they listen to while working in the rice fields because of the total improvements in their social and economic well-being. I do not think that communications alone can take the credit for this improvement.

Sometimes, technology can initiate the change, which
may be unplanned and unwanted. For instance, when cassette-players were first introduced, the central government was unhappy because people preferred to listen to music radio programmes and tapes instead of the radio news broadcasts. Sometimes, you cannot control these changes. That linkage between the formal communication structure and the non-communication structure is not easy to make.

Gradually in the villages an information elite is being created, consisting of people who can read newspapers which enter the villages (actually the government distributes newspapers so that they will read and tell other people what they contain). The information elite views television, listens to the radio, attends meetings, but what apparently happens is that it becomes a sort of gate keeper to protect its own interests.

It retains the economically valuable information for its own profit. For instance, when the government says that it is planning to increase the price of rice, or reduce the price of fertilizers — moves which will benefit the farmer — the information elite has an interest in the farmer so it will get a higher price. The information elite jumps ahead of the mass media, it gets more opportunities, for instance when the government announces about devaluation of rupiah against the dollar. The information elite starts buying things, it buys up all the stocks and make the farmers happy offering them slightly higher prices.
We in Indonesia have our own version of the North-South dialogue: the North in our case is the urban centres and the South is the rural areas. We try to reduce the imbalance by improving the situation in the South.

On the traditional arts, there is an interesting observation. On the one hand, they get wide exposure because of television coverage, but on the other hand, the practitioners of traditional arts are actually being edged out of business by competition from imitators. This leads to a lowering of the standards of traditional arts.