

Opportunities to scale up participatory approaches with youth and media

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Introduction

There is nothing new about the issue of going to scale. It has perplexed planners and development workers for decades. Is it perhaps time to look for a different way to scale up a participatory approach, especially one that involves communication?

Five key concepts that interact and interlink suggest that there is such a need. Those concepts are:

- Communication
- Participation
- Networking
- Diversity
- Association.

How they all relate is outlined in this paper.

Communication

According to the Society for Technical Communication, there are more than 125 published definitions of communication.¹ Recently, there are changing ideas on how to look at communication. For example, a recent paper by the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) Natural Resources Systems Programme (NRSP) notes that:

‘Communication is no longer seen as a top-down mechanism for the transfer of information, but as an iterative, interactive, multi-directional process involving a wide range of stakeholders.’²

Exchange – another DFID-funded programme that focuses on health communication – has a similar perspective and sees communication as:

‘a *process* for partnership and participation that is based on two-way dialogue, where there is an interactive interchange of information, ideas, techniques and knowledge between senders and receivers of information on an equal footing, leading to improved understanding, shared knowledge, greater consensus, and identification of possible effective action.’³

Both these perspectives resonate with a human rights approach to communication⁴ and the guiding principles of social change communication.⁵

Participation

Participation and communication go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other! Indeed, the Latin root of the word communicate means to share in common or to participate in.⁶

¹ Exchange is a networking and learning programme that that promotes effective health communication. Based in the UK at Healthlink Worldwide, it is funded by the UK Department for International Development. More information at www.healthcomms.org

This suggests – as Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron notes - that the process of communication is more important than the products of communication if we are trying to achieve social change and development. It is in the process of communication and participation that social change starts to happen.⁷

This also reinforces the idea that communication is a two-way process that goes way beyond the simple dissemination of information. If we focus on the idea of communication being a dynamic process, as something that is constantly moving and changing depending on the inputs of the people participating in it, we have a powerful tool that is fundamental for increasing understanding of the world around us.

But that process can be a real worry or concern for some people (and could well be one of the reasons why a participatory communication process does not take place more frequently). Through a participatory process, we begin to let go of fixed agendas. We move from the transmission of messages to a dialogue about what could be done. We move from a focus on delivering communication products to assessing whether anything happens as a result. We move from constant talking to more attentive listening and learning.

Networking

Paul Starkey provides one of the best definitions of networking⁸:

Networking involves making contacts and encouraging reciprocal information exchange and voluntary collaboration.

He adds that the process of networking is more important than the development of a structured network. He also notes that not all information exchange or collaborative action is necessarily networking. Dissemination of information is not by itself networking. There needs to be some dialogue, some reciprocity, some mutual interaction.

This definition is reinforced by the work of Paul Engel, the current director of the European Centre for Development Policy and Management (ECDPM). He says that networking is more than simply working together, but includes achieving 'social synergy'. He says, 'networking adds a fundamentally new quality to human cooperation. It enhances inclusive thinking, creativity and dialogue.'⁹

Networking builds links and connections among people who have different perspectives – different takes on the world they see. When they start communicating about those perspectives, opportunities to discover new insights, new ideas and to shape new approaches come to life. The example of networking and communicating by women's groups around progress at the Conference on Global Knowledge illustrates the point (see box 1).

1. Using networking to communicate change

In June 1997, women used their established communication and networking powers to advocate for an important shift in thinking at the Conference on Global Knowledge held in Toronto, Canada. They were able to convince the conference that the new technologies have to be designed in order to incorporate and build on women's knowledge and understanding of what women daily deliver.

Source: Harcourt, W. (n.d.) Women Creating Global Communication. Society for International Development Available at: <http://www.sidint.org/programmes/knowledge/Womencreatingcomm.PDF>

In summary, networking is a communication and participation process that makes connections, brings together different perspectives and experiences, and helps facilitate social interaction and change.

Diversity

Dynamic processes of communication, participation and networking lead inevitably to diversity in our thinking, our planning, our approaches.

Different voices articulating different perspectives help to develop different agendas. They focus on different problems – or on different ways of communicating or framing the problems. A programme planner interested in increasing condom use as a strategy for containing the HIV/AIDS pandemic sees the sex worker who does not use a condom regularly as a problem. She, on the other hand, sees her hunger and that of her child as the main problem, one that can be dealt with by the extra fee she can charge for sex without a condom.

Different solutions can emerge.

Approaches to scale

And that brings us to different approaches to scale. Robert Myers prepared a paper for UNICEF in 1984 on going to scale with programmes of early childhood development,¹⁰ in which he identified three ways of approaching scale:

- Expansion
- Explosion
- Association.

Expansion is probably the most familiar. It works on the premise that an idea is piloted at small scale in a particular location, analysed and evaluated and, if seen to be successful, is then expanded (usually with adaptation) to work across a number of locations or settings.

Explosion simply starts big, leaving out the pilot stage. It usually involves taking a particular model and applying it across a number of settings at once, to an agreed format. Follow up work helps to adjust the model to local circumstances.

Association is the linking of a number of different approaches in different locations that are each responding to the needs of the local populations they serve.

Let me give you an example of an expansion process. It started in a small fishing village – La Playa - near Barranquilla on Colombia's Atlantic Coast.¹¹ It involved a catalyst – the psychology department at Barranquilla's Universidad del Norte to supply concepts, researchers and resource people and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, to supply funds, knowledge and technical advice. It involved a community – mainly poor people, facing a declining and undervalued set of livelihoods and skills, but with a desire to do the best they could for their children. And it involved a cross-sectoral approach, stimulated by listening to what people said they wanted. The idea was to develop a process for setting up model pre-schools to improve opportunities for children to do better at school. In discussions with the community, it became clear that livelihoods, sanitation, health, recreation and housing were at least as big concerns. The team at Barranquilla soon involved a number of people from other disciplines at the university including engineers, lawyers and health professionals to work with the people of La Playa. Meanwhile, in exchange, work began on the development of a pre-school. The pre-school became the community's centre – owned and used by the community, not simply for the

children, but for adult learning, for meetings, for social events, as a place to meet, plan and organise. Oh, yes, and over the next few years, the children did well! Slowly the idea spread to neighbouring villages, then to other districts, until it was operating in most areas of the Costa Atlantica province. Part of the process involved discussions with the government – at local, regional and national level. Soon the various levels of government were interested in the approach. Fifteen years after the initial efforts in La Playa, the approach was entrenched in a national programme. (From then onwards, it became an explosion approach.) The communication element in all of this was extensive; much of it was interpersonal – listening to communities, analysing problems with them, reflecting with them on possible solutions, trying out some ideas, building the capacity of people to take the work forward.

I'm not going to go into detail about explosion. Think about immunisation campaigns and you have a good working model: a single approach, launched everywhere (well, nearly) and only adapted when the initial approach is apparently not working as well as expected, or some fine tuning is needed. Here too, communication plays a huge role in terms of informing, persuading, mobilising, reassuring and sometimes even entertaining.

Association is an approach for which there are few working models. Association often is best identified in retrospect: when you look at a number of activities and realise that they are all doing similar but different things and could link up easily. One recent example of a deliberate association approach is an attempt by AfriAfya in Kenya to work in different ways in different settings around the country to achieve better communication around HIV/AIDS.¹² AfriAfya has both an objective and a business plan that demands scale. But its approach to scale is predicated on diversity and building connections among efforts that are trying out approaches that are appropriate for their own settings. Communication is AfriAfya's business and it uses everything from locally made puppets to the internet and satellite radio networks.

What drives communication?

Communication work can fit into all three approaches. But communication – particularly communication that is hoping to encourage and enable change in society in some way - is really most akin to association, particularly where that association is planned strategically and involves a sharing of experience and a strong learning process among the association partners. Think about how you learn and work with new concepts. It is not a linear process where one step leads to the next. It is an iterative and complex process that involves leaps, reversals, slow plods, and the occasional dawning realisation. We learn best and communicate best in whatever culture in which we feel most comfortable and where there is a sense of trust. Fugelsang and Chandler made the point in 1987 that trust is a decisive factor in successful communication as well as in community participation and social transformation.¹³ They ask – and these questions are just as pertinent today – ‘What kinds of social environments are conducive to producing trust in people? How do we go about creating such social environments? What are the important means of communication in creating them?’

Interestingly, the article by Fugelsang and Chandler is dealing with communication and participation processes as part of the work of the Grameen Bank in villages in Bangladesh. Twenty years on from that, the Grameen model is again being hailed as a wonderful justification for the use of mobile phone technology as a communication tool [get a reference]. It is summarised by suggesting that giving rural women a mobile phone will help empower them, enable them to make great leaps in development, and increase their livelihood and the prospects for their families. Perhaps, but there are more than 20 years of communication work and building of

trust in those villages that makes it possible for such an approach to work.¹⁴ The technology doesn't drive communication. People drive communication.

What works?

David Korten's work in 1980 on community development in rural settings in Asia noted that there is 'no blueprint' for going to scale.¹⁵ However, the evidence of a learning process that leads to a sharing of knowledge and resources was a critical element.

What follows are some examples of communication programmes that have been effective at scale.

Soul City: good communication takes time

Soul City has found that mass media can raise awareness, generate discussion and increase knowledge. It can also play a part in shifting attitudes and behaviour. However, to be effective it needs to be used in the right way.¹⁶ Soul City has learned that it is not simply what you do, but how you do that makes a difference in its communication efforts. Two key elements drive the Soul City approach:

- extensive audience and formative research to clarify the issues to cover, test the effectiveness of the content, and ensure that reality in the form of lived experiences and voices of the audiences are captured
- partnerships with relevant organisations and people to ensure the communication work is integrated into wider local initiatives and strategies to increase impact and sustainability.

Soul City already works at considerable scale within South Africa. In response to requests, it began in 1999 to work across borders in four countries in southern Africa to improve access to information for young people about HIV/AIDS. A key vehicle for this was the development of a core publication aimed to reach more than 1.3 million young people aged 12-16 years. What started as a 10-month project, stretched over 2.5 years, and an important lesson was learned: it takes time to develop local capacity, to consult, to negotiate and to enable participation. But the time was necessary to ensure full support, proper co-ordination and sufficient consultation to identify innovative and locally relevant solutions to problems.

More recently, Soul City has begun to expand the whole package of its operation in 8 countries. Central to this approach is capacity development and the recognition that activities will evolve at a different pace and in different ways in each country.

Ghana and Tanzania: people-based mass media requires trust

In Ghana and Tanzania, agricultural programmes are raising awareness and sharing knowledge in a large number of villages by working with local communicators rather than mass media.¹⁷ In both instances, local volunteers are recruited to act as communicators to collect and disseminate information and to promote dialogue with their neighbours. In Tanzania, for example, the programme is designed as a learning link from the community to the District Government. It aims to bring all local people into the decision-making system, to elicit their ideas and their support in developing resource management patterns that will benefit both wildlife and local livelihoods. Trust plays a key role in the dialogue and communication.

Vietnam: variety and learning

In Vietnam, a UNICEF review of communication approaches in the water supply and sanitation sector found that a major challenge was to provide a systematic skills-based training to build the capacity of local communicators to use participatory approaches.¹⁸ The review identified a strategy for combining mass media,

interpersonal and print as the most effective way to communicate. The informal system of interpersonal communication was found to be particularly important, and even more so in some of the more remote parts of the country. Overall, it was clear that 'a variety of communication agents and channels' needed to be used.

Also from Vietnam, and this underpins the finding about interpersonal communication, is the story of the way Save the Children (SCF) began to tackle child malnutrition.¹⁹ The starting point was a concept described by SCF staff member, Jerry Sternin, as 'positive deviance'. By identifying why some children from poor families in villages did well, it became possible to identify some locally acceptable and relevant practices that could be used by others. But the key to the process was not then to teach others new knowledge, but let them discovering through encouraging dialogue and practice of new behaviour. A key part of that was letting those who had discovered the power of deviant behaviour to tell others about it. The ideas started in 4 villages, then spread to 14 – all the time discovering new solutions, new foods being used. The answers were never quite the same. Different solutions grew out of different soils. But the process remained the same: discover original local answers to the problem, and then give everyone access to the secrets. Over time, SCF used the 14 villages as a 'living laboratory' inviting people who wanted to improve nutrition to come and visit the villages, learn from the villagers and go away and practice in their own locations. The programme reached 2.2 million people in 265 villages. (And SCF has used the positive deviance approach in more than 20 countries.)

India: Building on little changes for sustainability

In India, the Hundred Block Plan, being undertaken by the Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF) and a sister organisation in Bihar is now working in 1700 villages and is reaching nearly 2 million people.²⁰ In each village work focuses on community health and economic activity. In 100 villages, and educational component is also included. In 2002, an Indian government official noted that government programmes had been reducing child malnutrition by 1% a year. He said the TNSF programme had been able to reduce malnutrition by 10% in just 18 months. This is a big change, but it is based on a principle of building on a series of little changes. At the root of the little changes lies the dedication of village people, such as Roja Romani – a 20-year old dalit woman whose family is very poor. Roja works in the fields all day as a labourer and comes home very tired. Then she goes on her rounds to talk to mothers in the village about child nutrition. This is unpaid work, and she has been doing this day after day for five years. Why? She has seen children with severe malnutrition improve and survive. She feels her work helps her save children's lives. This helps the children and it makes Roja feel powerful and capable.

Lessons and principles

Start slower and finish stronger

How a community tries to solve problems and adopt models or ideas from elsewhere is more important than what they do. Among the factors that help are the degree to which there is cross-sector collaboration to problem-solving and the degree to which an inclusive approach is taken that involves previously excluded populations. The US-based National Civic League – a body with more than 100 years of experience of supporting community-based approaches to strengthening local action – has found that involving diverse perspectives may make programme development and adoption more complex and add to the time spent during the early stages of decision making, but can help to speed up the implementation stage. This represents a new way of doing things – away from the top-down models that have dominated development around the world and towards a social change model that includes, involves and empowers.²¹

Build spaces where trust and dialogue can occur

All of the examples highlighted include a focus on community spaces, on encouraging dialogue about issues, on identifying people to act as facilitators and mobilisers in whom the community has trust.

Build relationships and connections

Communication is fundamentally about the relationships between people. Effective communication programming involves strengthening those relationships, encouraging partnerships, developing networks and coalitions, and encouraging connections.

Bring learning to the fore

As Christopher Gates of the National Civic League in the USA points out, going to scale is not so much about directly replicating or even adapting a model from one community to the next, but more about 'helping each other navigate the changing problem-solving sea. Sometimes the value of the model isn't in direct replication, it is in sharing the lessons that have been learned in the process of establishing the model.'

Don Richardson of Guelph University, and a long-time practitioner of participatory development communication approaches, particularly in agriculture, makes the point that 'it is not easy to engage in development communication practice that is participatory. Participatory development challenges inequitable relationships of power.'²² The communication channels that exist in a community are a reflection of its power structure.²³

Richardson points out that communication training is usually only seen in terms of 'technical training'. However, 'participatory development communication training requires significant attention to human relations practices such as group facilitation and group dynamics. Learning contexts need to be flexible and participatory. ... Field based training for participatory development communication is far superior to classroom training.' He stresses finding opportunities for practice, for reflection on the practice and experience, and for learners to identify specific inputs they might need to improve practice. He calls for ways to create a context that helps bring learning moments to the fore, that enables learners to experience critical learning moments 'in their own way, in their own time.'

Encourage and embrace variety

An alternative model of scale, one that builds upon diversity, embraces flexibility and variety, and encourages learning and continual reflection is important for communication work. Communication works best in its own cultural contexts. Good communication demands feedback and connection. When we take a good communication model that functions well at small scale because of its strong roots in a particular community and culture and try to grow it at a larger scale, we often cut off the very roots that nourish it. Associating a variety of different effective models may be the way to develop communication work at scale.

It's not what, but how

The experience of the Exchange programme in looking at what works in effective health communication has been that it is not what is done that matters, but how. Who is involved in the communication process? What role do they play? Who drives the agenda? Understanding the how comes about through practice, analysis, dialogue, reflection and new practice.

In that way, we move away from 'best practice' – which suggests a model that should not be changed – through 'good practice' – which suggests a set of ideas that might be tried and tested – to what at Exchange we like to call 'living practice'. Living practice is taking the learning from practice and feeding it back into the practice to modify and adapt the practice in a continuous process of improvement. Living practice is what we all do in our daily lives. It is how we adapt to changing circumstances. It is this adaptation that enables creative solutions to be found to the challenges we all face in development and communication.

Additional challenges

Other issues to consider in developing communication programmes at scale include making sure that a careful strategic analysis is done to identify key opportunities for building allies, partnerships, links and networks. No organisation or institution can do this kind of work alone. In some cases, the planning processes around sector wide approaches (SWAPs), Poverty Reduction Strategy Processes (PRSPs) and national AIDS control councils may provide significant opportunities for scaling up.

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