

Communications for Development Outcomes

By Olivier Serrat

Communication Matters

Communication is the process by which information¹ is conveyed through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviors. This is as pithy a definition as one is likely to read: and yet, it barely scratches the surface of a complex subject. Still, it is convenient that understatements, especially when they masquerade as exactitudes, give imagination the latitude it needs to elaborate: in actual fact, communicating occupies such a large part—if not the totality—of human interaction that it is well-nigh integral to our existence.

Basically, people communicate to help themselves, particularly where resources—controlled or shared—are scarce.² From this optic,



our definition rudely relegates communication to a supporting role, as if it were merely something that transpires between agents: it does not pay necessary and sufficient regard to communication as a defining state of

The void created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel, and misrepresentation.

—C. Northcote Parkinson

affairs, intrinsic to organizing. More usefully, then, communication should be recognized

Communication is the process through which relationships are instituted, sustained, altered, or ended by increases or reductions in meaning. Belatedly, as the field of development englobes ever-wider realms, it is finally recognized as a driver of change. Sped by the internet, strategic communications can explain activity and connect to purpose in more instrumental ways than have been considered so far.

¹ Over the past 3–4 decades, a General Definition of Information in terms of *data + meaning* has become an operational standard. The life cycle of information typically includes the following phases: (i) occurrence, (ii) transmission, (iii) processing and management, and (iv) usage.

² "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," the Gospel of John asserts in the New Testament. More down-to-earth, sociobiologists track the origin of language to the turning point when, from about 1 million years ago, groups of *Homo erectus* and later *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens* established home bases at which they raised their young and from which they foraged and scavenged for food; once they had instituted nests (campfires), environmental pressures began to select for traits that drew group members into ever more collaborative interaction. For in-group cooperation to ensue between humans, added mental capacity was needed—and grew—to let them construe one another's intentions and work together on what would otherwise be impossible tasks. Eventually, the added mental capacity developed into the ability to grasp abstraction and draw symbols for communication, thus leading to language. (Writing came to light in Mesopotamia much later, circa 3,500 BC.) Language made inferential communication—encoded or not—much more effective than mimicry. Oral and written expression of language is considered the most important dividing line between humans and animals. In our time, most humans can talk fluently by age four; by age six or seven, most can read and write with ease.

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The utter pervasiveness of communication as a part of everything so numbs our senses we forget its primordial function and think little of its value: this probably explains why we are not better at it, with telling results across the ages, aka miscommunication (and its quick antagonistic offsprings). Simply put, miscommunication owes to divergence between what a party wants to say to another, what it actually says, what the other party hears, what it understands, what it wants to say in response, and what it actually says if it responds at all. Even if facial expressions, tone of voice (including volume), and body language (including appearance) evidently impact more than words in oral communication, the same disconnects affect written forms of communication. In both instances, failure to relate effectively generally owes to emotional, cultural, organizational, personal, and situational filters—hardened by stress when information is transmitted *viva voce*—that only empathy and active listening can mitigate.

To make our communications more effective, we need to shift our thinking from "What information do I need to convey?" to "What questions do I want my audience to ask?"

—Chip Heath

"Why?" is always the most difficult question to answer. You know where you are when someone asks you "What's the time?" or "When was the battle of 1066?" or "How do these seatbelts work that go tight when you slam the brakes on, Daddy?" The answers are easy and are, respectively, "Seven-thirty-five in the evening," "Ten-fifteen in the morning," and "Don't ask stupid questions."

—Douglas Adams

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place," George Bernard Shaw contended. To which Peter Drucker added that miscommunication intuits we do not know what to say, when to say it, how to say it, or to whom to say it.³ Therefore, in any definition of communication, "commonality" is the operative word: communication does not just require a sender, a message and its conducive channel(s), as well as a recipient, preferably with means to feed back; it must also be intelligible and make agreeable mutual sense.⁴ Therein lies the why of it.

If only it were that simple ... Over the last half-century, information and communication technologies have revolutionized the world. They have evolved from recording systems (writing and manuscript production) to communications systems (the printing press) to processing and producing systems (the computer), conspicuously in the latter case by way of Web 2.0⁵ applications. Nowadays, almost all ("advanced") societies depend absolutely on information-based assets for the provision of information-intensive and information-oriented products and services, a verity that underscores the essential need to comprehend the life cycle of information and what core knowledge activities can bear on that. Today, social media⁶ that magnetize participation introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between individuals, communities, and organizations.⁷ For sure, however, the newfangled web- and mobile-based technologies that fuel them are but tools. In view of that, what is their end? It helps to restate the obvious: communication is about people.

³ There is more: all too often, the attempt to communicate is intentionally disingenuous and favors certain aspects of an argument. In worst-case scenarios, disinformation equates with propaganda, that is, the manipulation of information to influence public opinion. "Spin" is not the subject of these *Knowledge Solutions*.

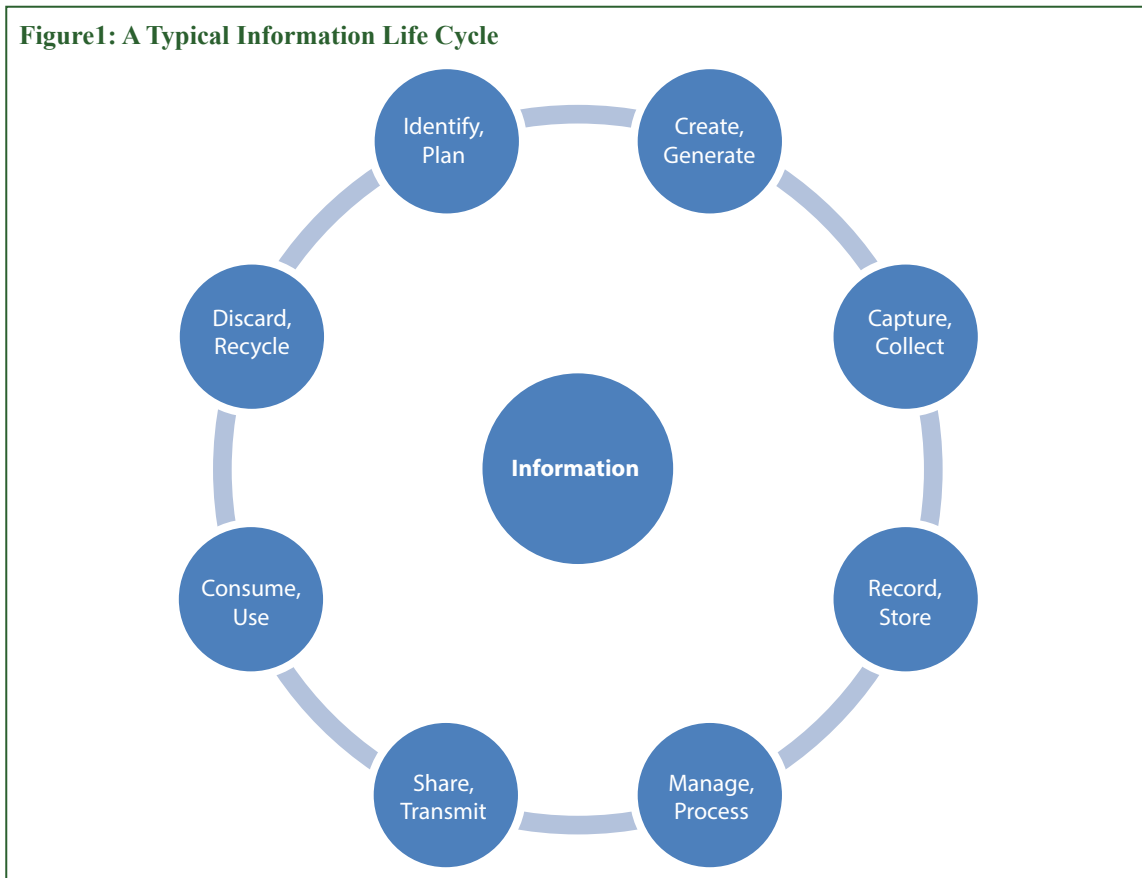
⁴ To note, the receiver need not be present or aware of the sender's intent to communicate at the time of communication. (Thus, communication can occur across vast distances, even ages.) Still, communication requires that the parties to it share an area of communicative commonality; the process can only be complete after the receiver has understood the message of the sender.

⁵ Hyperlinks between web pages—some with downloadable files—appeared less than 20 years ago with the advent of the World Wide Web in 1993. What is now known as Web 1.0 was the first stage in the evolution of the Web, driven at first by a top-down approach to posting and retrieving information in a set user interface. The early versions of organizational websites were de facto virtual brochures: unlike Web 2.0, which emerged 10 years later, information was closed to external editing.

⁶ Social media technologies take on many different forms, such as internet forums, magazines, microblogging, pictures, podcasts, ratings, social blogs, social bookmarking, social networks, videos, weblogs, and wikis.

⁷ For example, social media became in 2012 one of the most powerful sources of news updates through platforms such as Facebook, Google+, Twitter, and YouTube. (And, it is no overstatement to say that news—the communication of selected information on current events—have always played a vital role in human affairs.)

Figure1: A Typical Information Life Cycle



Source: Author.

Communication for Development 1.0

In development aid, which is also unequivocally about people, communication is essential to human, social, and economic progress, the purpose of which is the improvement of well-being and the betterment of the quality of life. And yet, it was never conspicuous—if at all present—in the prevailing bilateral and multilateral development agenda of the 1960s (industrialization), 1970s (basic needs), 1980s (neoliberalism and structural adjustment), 1990s (good governance), and 2000s (the Millennium Development Goals, aid effectiveness, new philanthropy and social impact investors).⁸

If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell six friends. If you make customers unhappy on the internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends with one message to a newsgroup.
—Jeff Bezos

⁸ Since 2000, emerging and developing countries have driven global economic growth, new sources of development finance have mushroomed, and the number of actors, instruments, and delivery mechanisms has continued to diversify. The emerging development agenda of the 2010s may be characterized by public-private partnerships, climate change finance, South-South styles of cooperation, evidence-based solutions, and what some term "Finance ++." (The first "plus" represents leverage; the second is knowledge.) In higher parallel, in increasingly felt kickbacks, the compass of development encircles eclectic interests in social change—applicable to any group regardless of geographical setting or material base—informed by a more fluid sense of transnational collectivities and agencies. (Spaceship Earth was a worldview, sponsored in the mid-1960s by Kenneth Boulding, Buckminster Fuller, and Barbara Ward, that expressed disquiet about mankind's frenetic use of vulnerable resources and invited everyone to band and work toward the greater, common good by making responsible choices in areas of ecology, economics, and ethics. In the 1980s and 1990s, post-development theory began to question the purpose of "developmentalism" and assailed its patronizing ideology of modernization, notably through the works of Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs. This critique underlies recent calls to drop the notion of development in favor of social change and social justice.)

Belatedly,⁹ as the field of development englobes ever-wider realms, there are indications that communication is finally deemed a key factor of development and a driver of change even if here and there it is still unavoidably colored by changing theories (and associated paraphernalia) of that, the only constant being the modes of persuasion—if not the mix—employed in support.¹⁰

The beauty of social media is that it will point out your company's flaws; the key question is how quickly you address these flaws.

—Erik Qualman

Communication for development is not public relations or corporate communication:¹¹ communication for development is a process of strategic, imbedded interventions¹²—initiated by individuals, communities, and organizations—designed to advance the public good. Beyond mere telling, using a wider range of tools, methods, and approaches than heretofore

courtesy of social media, it is about listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing to build organizational and system capacity at different levels. With social media, which demonstrates that more value can be extracted from voluntary participation than anyone ever imagined until now, dialogical communication can contribute to sustainable individual, communal, and organizational development outcomes. With a click, stakeholders can now make their realities count. Now positioned as real-time discourse, especially if it appreciates political economy to better circumscribe the geometry of development and take on the goal of empowerment, communication for development can create awareness, foster norms, influence policy makers, mobilize support, encourage change, and even shift the frames of social issues. On account of the internet, the formerly reactionary conceptualizations and justifications that advocates of participatory development promulgated in the mid-1970s have come of age: the greatest accolade is that they are now taken for granted in the broader framework of strategic communications that inform and inspire clients, audiences, and partners and just as importantly help the initiating parties learn. In the 2010s, with the added realization that we need better communication of evidence,¹³ no development agency can afford the business-as-usual of old-fashioned, reactive external communications.¹⁴

When we change the way we communicate, we change society.

—Clay Shirky

⁹ This is not to say nothing happened. The seminal and controversial MacBride Report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, *Many Voices One World*, appeared in 1980. It invited nations to make communications central to the diagnosis of needs and the design and implementation of resulting development strategies. But it took another 10 years for declarations and statements on communication for development to gather steam—never mind being acted upon in ways that promote change. And, a further 15 years went by before the first World Congress on Communication for Development was held in Rome on 25–27 October 2006 to position and promote the field of communication for development in the overall agenda of development and international cooperation. See Panos London. 2007. *Mapping Declarations and Statements on Communication for Development*. Panos Publications Ltd. Historically, communication for development owes much to Paulo Freire's work on participatory communications with landless Brazilian peasants from the 1950s: he believed education to be a political act that could not be divorced from pedagogy. From the outset, the focus of participatory communication was on dialogical communication for agriculture and rural development, this in opposition to what were felt to be acontextual, ethnocentric, hierarchical, and linear Western concepts and mediated technologies, e.g., radio, television, for modernization. Communities were to be the protagonists of social change, not the passive beneficiaries of decisions made by foreign experts who know better. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was translated and published in English in 1970. Robert Chambers, a leading figure of the participatory tradition thereafter, framed the argument well when he inquired about whose reality counts.

¹⁰ Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, written circa 350 BC, identified three modes of persuasion: ethos (an appeal to the authority or honesty of the presenter), logos (an appeal to logic), and pathos (an appeal to the audience's emotions).

¹¹ For the sake of completeness, one should add advocacy, participatory communication, policy communication, and technology (or educational) transfer to the list. The point is that they are not the same: each function has its own rationale; each brings into play different tools, methods, and approaches.

¹² Social marketing remains a frequently employed approach, particularly in health, nutrition, and population projects. (It bodes well for environmental conservation too.) Radio and television, now used to emphasize access and dialogue, are still popular. Telecenters, community theater, and development journalism, to name a few, are relatively recent additions.

¹³ Witness, for instance, the accent that is now placed on conducting impact evaluations and linking research to practice. Central to corporate governance, both sets of activities aim to bridge the evidence gap to help actors invest responsibly: both inform policy by spreading lessons of what works in development, including how and under what circumstances. Toward this, prerequisites are improving the quality of research; promoting communication, dissemination, and marketing of research; investing in translational research; and building capacity for evidence-based policy—all necessarily at the same time. To note, from the mid-2000s, development agencies have also sought to enhance the internal and external effectiveness of their operations with tools, methods, and approaches of knowledge management. For a set of these, see ADB. 2008–. *Knowledge Solutions*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions

¹⁴ It is easy to confirm the commitment of development agencies to communication for development: (i) has the organization formulated a communication policy and a strategy for its implementation? (ii) have senior positions been created for communication strategists and have specialized staff been recruited? (iii) is there a specific budget allocation to communication for development, e.g., 10%, distinct from information dissemination?

Communication for Development 2.0

In a globalizing world of mobile money, new institutions, business models, and practices are challenging long-established development agencies.¹⁵ Yet, the majority of the latter still fail to see communication as a systemic issue, meaning, something linked to political economy and what institutions (or forces) and processes shape that. Not surprisingly, the run-of-the-mill recommendations they make to improve communication for development offer options at the project level, rarely anything else, and even then as afterthoughts.¹⁶ (Lest we forget, such communication support can in any event only be as effective as the project itself.)¹⁷

It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

—C.S. Lewis

Under pressure to change, development agencies must with strategic communications emulate the disruptors of the 2010s or face irrelevance. Communication for Development 2.0 can help them ramp up dialogue with engagement by beneficiaries and stakeholders to make their realities count; build partnerships and support for the work they conduct; and transparently demonstrate impact.¹⁸ In a virtuous circle counting on knowledge products and services, Communication for Development 2.0 can also boost staff commitment, team collaboration, and business agility, and thereby help development agencies deliver more with less.

Of Strategic Communications

Strategic communications consider the what, why, where, and how of comprehensive engagement at international, national, sector, and theme as well as project levels. Based on what values they espouse, principles of continuity, credibility, dialogue, integration, precision, results-orientation, ubiquity, and understanding can underpin their communications for development outcomes.

Specifically, in an ensuing collection of ideas, preferences, and methods, strategic communications combine multimedia, multi-outlet, and multiparty outreach with face-to-face efforts, including storytelling, to explain activity and connect to purpose. Sure enough, they must be designed for adaptive and generative learning in a complex and fast-changing environment. Plainly, that cannot be achieved by fixed, central structures: instead, what is needed is a shared strategic communications mindset, integral to every office and department in an organization; it is the fostering of such culture in the immediacy of social media that will promote the necessary changes in current practice. In short, strategic communications are not a component of an organization's long-term strategic framework but an enabler that both delivers and conditions it, this in more instrumental ways than have been considered so far.

You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your ideas won't get you anywhere.

—Lee Iacocca

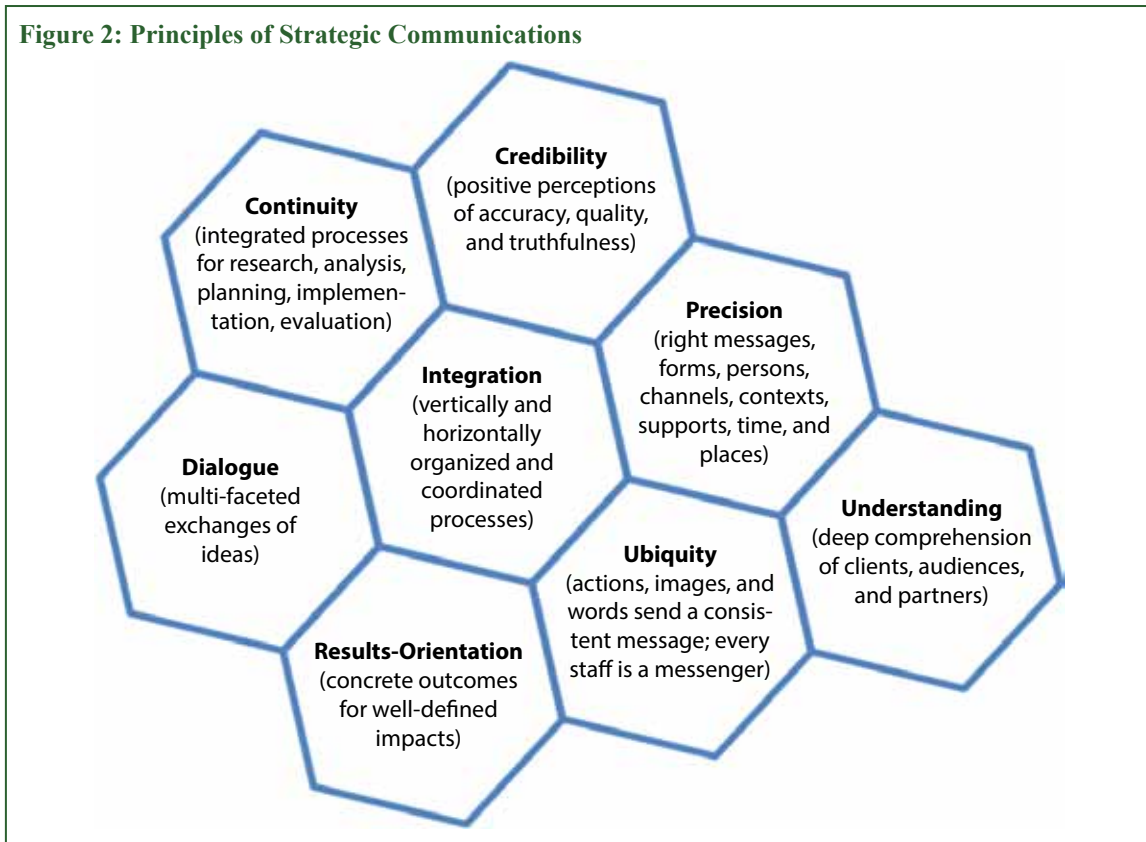
¹⁵ Shocking though it may be, it helps to envisage development agencies as just another industry, one that is admittedly undergoing creative destruction as the emerging agenda of the 2010s, delineated earlier, intimates.

¹⁶ At best, Communication for Development 1.0 aimed to maximize direct impact through content-based change. It was rarely exploited to induce discursive change in the way we see the world and the concepts we use to understand it, in other words, double-loop learning. To Silvio Waisbord, the potential contributions of Communication for Development 1.0 were cut in three ways. First, bureaucratic needs for messaging favored informational models over participatory approaches. Second, the weak status of communication as an autonomous field of study and practice in development agencies undermined prospects for expanding understanding where the discipline did not fit prevalent institutional expectations. Third, the predominance of technical mindsets that held out solutions to political problems limited participation thinking. (Many will say this situation holds in our day.) See Silvio Waisbord. 2008. The Institutional Challenge of Participatory Communication in International Aid. *Social Identities*. 14 (4). pp. 505–522.

¹⁷ Even then, as the *Knowledge Solutions* on value cycles for development outcomes describe, opportunities to communicate, connect, collaborate, capitalize, and communicate further occur variously at distinct stages of the project cycle. See ADB. 2009. *Value Cycles for Development Outcomes*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/value-cycles-development-outcomes

¹⁸ Compare this with the following statement: "The overall goal of the communication strategy is to demonstrate to key stakeholders and the general public that [name of the organization] should be seen as the premier development finance institution in [name of the region]." Clearly, Communication for Development 2.0 cannot be a one-way process whereby narratives flow from the core for unquestionable application by agents. In any case, cyberspace now lets clients, audiences, and partners wield the swift rod of critical feedback.

Figure 2: Principles of Strategic Communications



Source: Author.

Crafting a communication strategy is more of an art than a science but the steps are not foreign. Irrespective of level, e.g., national or project, a communication strategy should establish the objectives and policy context—the latter subject to external influences; audiences; desired changes;¹⁹ messages; tools and activities; capacities and resources; timescales; and, vitally, provide for monitoring and evaluation and subsequent amendment. Being strategic means consistently making what core directional choices will best move an organization toward its hoped-for future. In communications as elsewhere, it depends on having vision; building alliances; setting priorities; adopting goal- and action-oriented approaches; applying logical consistency but also adaptability in unfolding elements of the strategy; and managing resources systematically.

Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.

—William Butler Yeats

¹⁹ Change expresses itself in five ways: (i) discursive, (ii) procedural, (iii) content-based, (iv) attitudinal, and (v) behavioral.

Further Reading

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Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

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