

Changing Media, Changing Societies: Media and the MDGs *Making Communication Visible in the MDGs**

by Florangel Rosario-Braid, Ph.D.
President Emeritus, Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication

“The strength of the people comes not from what they hold in their hands but what they have in their heads.”

Stedle, in Dragon and Tufte, 2006

“Eliminating poverty in all its forms must involve a multi-dimensional approach-providing adequate standard of living and attainment of other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights... (and a strategy on) Communication for development that puts people at the centre of decision-making, enables dialogue, facilitates information and knowledge-sharing, builds understanding around development issues and amplifies the voice and influence of people in public debates.”

Towards a Common UN System Approach, Achieving the Millennium Development Goals
Report of the 10th UN Inter-Agency Round Table on Communication for Development, 2007. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Communication for development is a topic that has long attracted the attention of scholars, policy scientists, and program planners. The literature of development contains a wealth of studies by the academe and development institutions which had addressed many priority social and economic issues. But the scope of the challenge has never been as great as that presented by the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs. Those of us who have had continuing association with the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre or AMIC recognize and appreciate its past initiatives including this week’s conference to mobilize the communication community and development partners in meeting a global challenge. For my sub-topic, I thought I would raise the issue of visibility and impact of communication in responding to the MDGs vision with the question – If we are asked to lead in the knowledge society, why are we not at the forefront when it comes to responding to the most urgent global problems today?

The MDGs as a road map

The MDGs are measurable, time-bound, and attainable. When achieved, 500 million are expected to be lifted out of poverty, 250 million will no longer suffer from hunger, 30M children and 2M mothers will not die. By 2015, all 191 UN countries have pledged and are expected to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop global partnership for development.

* Presented at the Fourth AMIC Distinguished Forum, 17th AMIC Annual International Conference, “Changing Media, Changing Societies: Media and the Millennium Development Goals.” July 14-17, 2008, Manila Hotel, Manila, Philippines

These eight goals are easy to communicate if we are primarily concerned with advocacy of the existing campaign. Its 18 targets, and 40 indicators are specific and quantitative. Furthermore, there exists an unprecedented political commitment and agreement in the attainment of the goals.

But the MDGs will need greater focus, and a sense of urgency. This is a communication challenge.

Much progress had been made since its launch seven years ago such as the halving of the poverty target in the Philippines. But these indicators show that much needs to be done. They include a decline in participation rate at the primary school level, slowing down of decline in maternal deaths, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education. It still has to meet challenges such as addressing wide disparities across regions, high population rate, low agricultural productivity, strengthening governance, specifically at the local level, transparency and accountability, and peace and security. There are substantial improvements in reducing child mortality, and attaining gender equality. Its partnership with civil society has resulted in the formulation of the 2007 Alternative Budget for MDGs, an innovative budgetary plan that suggests reallocation of resources to MDG priorities.

However, on a worldwide scale, the picture looks grim: 10.7 M children every year do not live to see their 5th birthday; more than 1 billion live in abject poverty on less than \$1 a day; while a total of 3 billion live on less than \$2 a day. The HIV/AIDs pandemic has inflicted the single greatest reversal in human development, particularly in Africa. But the data to support impact and relevance of communication is rare, and if available, is sketchy and difficult to access.

The MDG goals are premised on the broader definition given by development agencies – European Commission, the World Bank, UNDP, among others, stating that poverty is linked with deprivation of basic capabilities and includes non-monetary factors such as the lack of access to education, health, natural resources, employment, land and credit, political participation, services and infrastructure. Poverty also covers the “risk dimension, the notion of vulnerability, and the lack of capability to exert “voice.”

The MDGs in a Changing Society and Changing Media

The pioneering work in communication for development started in the 60's up to the 80's with noted scholars such as Wilbur Schramm, Daniel Lerner, Everett Rogers, Luis Ramiro Beltran, Nora Quebral, among others, who provided conceptual models and frameworks in the study of modernization, diffusion and social change. In their research which had guided future cross-cultural studies, they demonstrated the critical role of communication as facilitator in the adoption of change in areas such as agriculture, education, population, and organizational innovations. It was about the same time when developing countries began to raise questions on the inequitable distribution of information between the receivers of information and the producers of information - the West. This and related issues of balance not only in flow but also in the content of communication and ownership of media channels constituted the principal platform of the New World Information Order,

some of the issues of which the principal research work of Herbert Schiller was built around. In the late 70's, Sean MacBride led a group of 16 eminent men and women who were commissioned by UNESCO to undertake a comprehensive study of issues "towards a new, more just and more efficient information and communication order, in the landmark publication, **Many Voices, One World**.

Among the noteworthy initiatives in communication for development (C4D) over the past two decades is that of the Communication for Social Change Consortium which in 2006 published *Communication for Social Change*, an anthology edited by Alfonso Gumaca-Dragon and Thomas Tufte.

But the presence of communication scholars in the emerging global problems during the recent past has not been visibly felt. In most of the projects, protocols, and development agenda on significant global problems which required intervention from international funding agencies such as resource management (water, energy, air, solid waste, fisheries, disaster, health) as well as governance, peace and social conflict, communication's role has been merely secondary. It was primarily focused on advocacy, information dissemination or other support roles, as compared with economists, management specialists, sociologists and political scientists whose involvement in impact and cost-effectiveness evaluation and project management has resulted in more relevant and substantial contributions.

The current call to provide the Communication for Development or C4D requirements of the MDGs is an opportunity to demonstrate how the discipline can play a more "activist" role. It poses a tremendous challenge because there is greater pressure to deliver results within a specific timeframe. Every member country is expected to prepare its own strategic plan. The MDG provides an intersectoral platform, an opportunity for government, private and civil society sectors are able to harmonize objectives. The goals are "survival" concerns and require a multidisciplinary approach. There is need to draw cross-cultural comparisons and translate the knowledge into policies and programs. Unarguably, a consensus exists on the urgent need for a coherent, comprehensive and responsive delivery system to alleviate the condition of 500 million of the poorest of the poor.

Globalization and the New Information and Communication Technologies

The two significant trends during the past decade are **globalization** and the emergence of the **new information and communication technologies**. These developments have resulted in profound changes in the communication content and processes and in the relationships among stakeholders.

One is **convergence**, a result of the blurring of differences among traditional media which are now linked with the new media. It can be regarded as a positive development as it allows integration of knowledge in a variety of formats and multi-channels. However, it can widen the gap between the central sources of information and the majority of information users. Because the capital investments needed to sustain convergence are heavy, media owners are expectedly protective of their investments by catering to the marketplace through entertainment-oriented content rather than information for basic survival.

“Demassification”, the counter-trend to mass communication will continue as the new media which are interactive, encourage viewer-users to actively participate in the generation and distribution of information.

“Citizen journalism” is another counter-trend to traditional journalism. The new ICTs allow bloggers, podcasters and social networkers, the new citizen journalists to work in a complementary role with professional journalists.

Continuing transnationalization of media and ICT ownership becomes a threat as industry owners determine strategy and content orientation.

A paradigm shift in the learning system mediated by ICT – shift from traditional teacher-centered and school-based system to collaborative learning will require a parallel mindset shift among educators and technology planners.

Emergence of new dynamics and tensions

- between public domain information and intellectual property rights
- between fair use vs. copyright
- between cultural pluralism vs. homogeneity
- between access to information vs. privacy of communication
- between professional online journalism and citizen journalism driven by new technologies
- between user-generated and big-media produced content

UNESCO’s advocacy of public domain information is part of a global concern in the management and protection of the world’s public goods, including knowledge and information. The issue is not so much of under-provision of knowledge as lack of access to knowledge.

Public domain information is that produced by government, the academe and development information agencies and can be availed of without cost. It is publicly available, the use of which does not infringe on copyright. But it may not be easily accessible. Thus, there is need to establish portals and gateways such as knowledge banks as well as educating users that information protected by copyright can still be availed of without cost as long as it is used for education, research and journalistic purposes. A policy concern is that of ensuring that intellectual property rights rules do not reduce equity rights.

Internet which now constitute a major information source must not be regarded as a competitor. Its capacity for knowledge management is limited as it is unable to distill and evaluate the information. It does however have the attributes needed for a delivery system - reach, capacity to provide interactivity, exchange and sharing in the global information commons. The deployment of the new ICTs will however require new mindsets and new skills described as:

Information literacy which is the skill to generate, process, evaluate and utilize information. A survival skill in the information society. In specific terms, these competencies “allow one to know when information is needed to solve a problem; make a decision, articulate that information need in searchable terms and language; search efficiently for the information, retrieve it, interpret and understand it, organize it, evaluate its credibility and authenticity, assess its relevance, communicate it to others if necessary, then utilize it to accomplish bottom line purposes. Literacy is closely allied to learning to learn and to critical thinking.”

Media literacy - a set of skills, attitudes and knowledge that equips one to understand and utilize various kinds of mediums and formats in which information is communicated - from a sender to a receiver such as images, sound, and video, and whether as a transaction between individuals or as a mass transaction between a single sender or many receivers; knowing when and how to use print, radio, broadcast and cable TV, and the other new technologies or formats.

The new ethical principles for the Information Society are based on the recognition of man’s dignity and autonomy, i.e., his capacity for personal development, and a moral legal obligation for the State to establish an environment of solidarity and social justice through “rights-based approaches”. (Ethics and human rights in the information society, Proceedings, synthesis, and recommendations, European Regional Conference, 2007).

Impact of Globalization

Initial research has shown positive impact of globalization on poverty reduction despite the fact that it fosters greater inequality. Among its discernible consequences its impact on the political economy and the rise of crises in many fronts.

On the political economy, they include:

- **“Commoditization”** - transforming information into a saleable good, available to those with the ability to pay. This changes the goal of information access from an egalitarian to a privileged condition and results in the “corporatization” of culture. The information industry which include database and software producers and other sellers of packaged information, publishing, film, TV, radio, recording, photography, advertising, and providers of “symbolic goods and services” such as museums, shopping malls are cultural industries. The heavy public consumption of these cultural products and the contexts in which most of them are provided, represent a diet of systemic values. These media transmit the thinking a perspectives of the dominant. (Schiller in Dragon and Tufte, 2006)
- **“Digital divide”** or digital inclusion – Elites who own telecommunication and digital services attempt to control regulatory entities. Meanwhile, the poor have to pay for the services that are vital elements of health, environment and food security. (Robinson in Dragon and Tufte, 2006)

- **Emergence of services described as “informational capital”, consisting of**
 - financial capability to pay for the use of electronic networks and information services
 - technical ability to handle these networks, infrastructures and
 - intellectual capacity to filter and evaluate information, and active motivation to seek information and apply it in social situations

- **Drive towards innovation and application of new knowledge** in the restructuring of economic, social and political institutions

- **Crises occurring in these various fronts:**
 - **The Environmental Crisis**
Climate change, global warming, population and migration issues, continuing depletion of resources which require new knowledge and mindsets as well as a systematic response to issues such as need to balance productivity with resource conservation, inculcating sustainable development values and bioethics

 - **The Cultural and Identity Crisis**
Need to address cultural and linguistic diversity, ethnic and religious conflict

 - **The Governance Crisis**
Transparency and accountability, democratic participation, decentralization, access to justice

 - **The Crisis in Education**
Need for a responsive educational system guided by democratic, popular, and transformative principles. Integrating ideological principles of the libertarian, the feminist, the ecologist in the learning system

Communication for Development (C4D) and the MDGs

The UN “Delivering as One”, provides a common platform by which UN agencies cooperate, share expertise and experiences and organize a coherent approach in responding to development challenges such as the MDGs.

The 10th UN Inter-Agency Roundtable on C4D held in 2007 makes these observations and recommendations:

- Insufficient platforms for interaction, little visibility and experience exchange
- Limited resources and recognition of C4D to enable proper facilitation and delivery of common strategies by government, donors and UN system organizations
- Shortfall in C4D specialists, especially at middle and high levels. Those involved are specialists in external relations and information dissemination.

- Need to map out country initiatives by starting out with needs assessment, audits, participatory communication processes, and development of impact indicators. Pilot country communication activities are recommended in order to create spaces for different actors to come together and agree on joint actions and initiatives.
- Data to support impact and relevance of communication tools and strategies at national level is rare, and if available, is sketchy and difficult to access
- Need to factor into policy research and lessons learned. Given the rapid evolution of theory and practice, systematic data-gathering and processing will enhance the UN system's relevance and credibility
- C4D should be integrated into log frame planning guidelines
- Increase joint inter-agency collaboration at international and country levels., strengthen awareness, and harmonize C4D programming approaches
- Need for conceptual and methodological clarity – focus on tools and methodologies
- Need for a more visible intersectoral platform for UN agencies

The above suggests research questions, policy and advocacy requirements and field action programs and can be harmonized with other UN agency concerns:

- UNDP' - providing people "voice" in poverty reduction. Their activities include research-action on Access to Information and support for the communication themes in the Human Development Report
- UNICEF's principal concerns are advocacy, social mobilization, and engaging young people in social change
- FAO's focus is that of harnessing old and new technologies such as rural radio to promote participation, ownership and articulation of community needs
- World Bank's concerns include governance, accountability, participation of civil society, and a sustainable business environment
- UNESCO, the UN lead agency in communication has for its primary objectives building open and inclusive knowledge societies, pluralism, freedom of expression, universal access to information, cultural diversity, especially widening access to diverse content, standards setting for public service broadcasting and regulatory frameworks

Inter-agency collaboration on communication approaches to health, environment, agriculture, livelihood, gender, education, habitat, impact of ICTs on poverty, ICTs to facilitate market access by marginalized groups, promote telecentres, overcoming the digital divide, creation of a communication environment that promote social and economic rights and access to information by marginalized groups, are among the priorities identified by the UN Report.

While the UN approach is primarily aimed at mobilizing partners and beneficiaries at the grassroots level, the World Congress on Communication for Development, although in support of the same goals, further emphasize the integration of corporate communication strategies to promote visibility in a highly competitive environment.

Review of Earlier Initiatives in C4D for the MDGs

Among the earlier initiatives include statements from the following roundtable meetings:

The Bellagio Statement (2004) suggests a new strategic thinking about meeting the MDGs based on effective communication that can no longer be seen as information dissemination alone.

The Rome Consensus (2006) highlights the need to strengthen the communication for development capacity within countries and organizations at all levels.

The Paris Declaration (2005) recommends the promotion of national ownership through participatory policy dialogue.

The UN Delivering as One (2006) cites participatory dialogue and responsiveness as critical attributes of a communication strategy.

The UNDP Roundtable Discussion (1994) recommends integrating behavior change communication to empower individuals and to enable communities to make informed choices; communication strategies that emphasize dialogue and process; advocacy communication with organized efforts by coalition networks to influence policy decisions, public participation, and social norms.

The UNDP likewise suggests the crafting of a codified concept of communication for empowerment which leverages access to information and two-way mechanism to allow the marginalized to voice their needs and participate in decision-making.

The United Nations urges promotion of the UN Declaration of Human Rights provision on Freedom of Expression which states:

“Everyone has right to freedom of opinion and expression, the right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.”

The Human Rights perspective recommends the identification of rights holders (people entitled to claim civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights) and duty bearers (institutions responsible to ensure the respect of these rights).

Summary

The issue of rights is central in all the declarations and pronouncements on the MDGs. It is summarized thus: “People have the right to escape poverty, access health and education, and ensure environmental sustainability to future generations. Women have the right to be treated equally.”

The MDGs envisage a systematic application of communication for development methodologies at the country level to build constituencies around a national development agenda in which all citizens, especially the marginalized, can identify priorities, ownership, and accountability. The strategy further suggests examining the correlation between poverty and achievement rate in access to education, health and other services and the need to involve communication specialists in research, evaluation and to integrate policy research and lessons learned.

MDGs must be seen as communication tools rather than as an object of communication as they have the potential of making development more understandable to people at the center of development – the vulnerable, the poor, and sexually excluded. (Paola Pagliani)

Individual and collective commitment to the C4D goals in the MDGs such as empowerment, and equity through use of various communication tools and strategies to generate appropriate information, enable access to information, mediate discussion and dialogue, enable people’s voices to be heard and sustaining these achievements through documentation and exchange of experiences, networking and advocacy is critical.

The tasks ahead will have to focus on these challenges:

- Promotion of pluralism and diversity in media through appropriate regulatory framework that prevents commercial interests from becoming too dominant; as well as ensuring editorial independence.
- Management of social and cultural diversity through effective mediation and fair representation, managing tensions caused by changes in relationship between citizens, media and journalists, a change that questions the role of traditional journalism.
- Reorientation of communicators’ mindsets and skills in sourcing, processing, distribution and utilization of information, emphasizing critical thinking, adherence to ethical standards and human dialogue as it guides skills in mediating, catalyzing, facilitating and eliciting feedback and participation.
- Design and provision of intersectoral platforms which would engage communication specialists to undertake strategic policy research and demonstrate relevance of C4D in MDG, therefore enhancing its visibility through integration in national development planning.

What then are the implications on the role of communication?

From the analysis of the challenges within the changing environment, we can draw six major implications on the changing role of communication:

- The first is that of management of multidisciplinary knowledge - linking knowledge from various disciplines to be delivered through a multi-channel platform;
- The second is the management and balancing of tensions, conflicts and interests which are present not only in environmental issues but in other areas – political ideology, culture and religion, natural resources, especially water and energy;
- The third is acting in its traditional watchdog function, but broadening it by becoming a fulcrum for trending and forecasting;
- The fourth is that of designing proactive communication strategies;
- The fifth is translation of knowledge into policies and providing the strategy and forum for policy advocacy; and
- The sixth is theory building around the new realities of the local and global environment.

The C4D community cannot remain in the sidelines of today's Knowledge Society. It has to play a lead role. It has to be an activist if it has to remain relevant.

Finally, let me end with this quote and visual from a Norwegian official on poverty and the ICTs:

The hungry cannot eat computers. But neither can they eat plows that are extremely useful tools that help feed the world. Information and communication technologies are powerful tools in helping us solve basic problems on education, health, nutrition, livelihood and environment.

Paraphrased from Olav Kjørven, State Secretary
for International Development of Norway

References

Gumaca-Dragon, Alfonso and Tufte, T. (2006). *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. New Jersey: Communication for Social Change Consortium, Inc.

Hamelink, C.J. (1984). *The politics of world communication*. London: Sage Publications

Horton, F.W. (2007) *Understanding Information Literacy: A Primer*. Paris: UNESCO Communication and Information Sector

MacBride, S. (1980). *Many Voices, One World*. Paris: UNESCO

Philippines Midterm Progress Report on the Millennium Development Goals (2007)

Rundle, M. and Conley, C. (2007). *Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies: A Survey*. Paris: UNESCO Communication and Information Sector

Towards a Common UN System Approach, Achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Report of the 10th UN Inter-Agency Round Table on Communication for Development, 2007. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia