

# Communication and the MDGs: No magic information bullets

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The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are one of the most ambitious global commitments ever to improving social conditions, particularly those affecting the most excluded and marginalized populations worldwide. As such, they are a blueprint to motivate, guide, inspire and hold accountable governments, donors and organizations. But where is communication?

Like any list, particularly one elaborated and agreed upon at high policy level, the MDGs are incomplete. Anybody who feels passionate about development surely finds it insufficient to mobilize the global collective behind key issues at a crucial juncture. Just to mention two goals: Reducing violence, a condition that not only affects millions everyday but also accounts for the persistent difficulties in achieving a host of social goals, is notoriously absent. Similarly, improving access to safe water, an everyday luxury for one-third of the world population, should have been listed too.

As some who has worked and taught development communication for 20 years, I cannot help but notice that communication goals are also absent. Considering that communication adjectives are frequently used to describe our information-saturated times, the absence of communication goals is striking. Although information and media industries are some of largest and most dynamic worldwide, commerce and politics invest astronomical amounts on 'communication', and information networks have become the backbone of a globalized world, communication is not mentioned in the MDGs. While everyone seems to think that communication is important, apparently it is not crucial enough to make it onto the list.

Furthermore, this absence is particularly noticeable considering that, for decades, international organizations alongside policymakers, scholars, activists and professionals have encouraged the global community to rally behind fundamental communication goals such as the democratization of means of expression, and the building and sustaining of tolerant and pluralistic societies.

## Communication as a set of instruments

This absence offers an opportunity to reflect upon the status of development communication in global policymaking. Perhaps the 'communication' community has not made a persuasive

argument to convince power-holders to take communication goals seriously. If true, it will be ironic since, given professional reputations, communication professionals should know how to advocate for their own field. It is also plausible that they have not been as powerful and organized as other interest groups to influence the MDG agenda, or that decision-makers are not sensitized enough to the merits of communication goals.

Calling attention to this gap is motivated neither by professional pride nor by the belief that values and objectives dear to our field should be recognized as important as maternal health and children's education. The intention is rather different: to point out the obvious fact that as long as it is not explicitly present in the MDGs, communication is implicitly relegated to playing an auxiliary, instrumental role to achieve other objectives.

Why is it important? Simply, as long as goals are defined in terms of health, education, or poverty-reduction, organizations and specialists in those areas define appropriate strategies, earmark resources, hire staff and decide other programmatic components. Media analysts know all too well that framing issues and problems in terms of news or fictional content largely determines what is discussed and what solutions are considered.

Likewise, having defined specific indicators, the MDGs automatically determine that development is foremost a matter of improving health, educational and gender conditions. All other definitions of development, a perennial topic of discussion in communication and other social sciences, need to engage with the prevailing understanding that underlies the MDGs. Once 'development' is synonymous with specific indicators (e.g. percentage of patients who complete tuberculosis treatment, the percentage of girls who complete primary education), other definitions of development (from 'the opening up of opportunities' to 'the participation of communities in debating and shaping their own lives') need to be reviewed and adjusted.

Another important consequence is that institutions specifically endowed with health, poverty, and educational mandates wield tremendous influence to determine how to achieve those goals. Medical approaches are likely to be proposed as best suited to redressing health inequalities, economic strategies are submitted to solve poverty, and so on.

Where does that leave communication? As a field of study and practice, it is frequently expected to demonstrate to other disciplines its contributions to the MDGs. How does communication help to mitigate health, education, gender, and socio-economic inequalities? What is its value-added to programmes designed by non-communication experts? Why should medical doctors, economists or policy wonks assign funding for communication? In a world of limited resources and professional boundaries, they would rather prefer to earmark funds for programmatic components that they are more familiar with.

These questions are both challenging and uncomfortable. They challenge communication to document the impact of their knowledge and practice on other fields; and they put communication in the unfair situation of having to prove its merits, as if all other disciplines have impeccable records in terms of development effectiveness. (When was the last time the medical sciences or economics had to prove their contributions to a jury of journalists, press lawyers and community leaders who held the purse strings?)

## Locked in the informational paradigm

Because communication is mostly foreign to the conference rooms and hallways where high-level decisions are discussed and agreed, arguments about its contributions often run into existing expectations and pre-assigned roles.

How is communication perceived? Without hard evidence, it is difficult to provide a solid answer applicable to all cases and organizations. All generalizations are likely to miss nuances and exceptions. However, if my experience and countless stories are representative, one could confidently say that communication is primarily seen as a group of information dissemination tools. It is associated with press releases, brochures, posters, websites, and message design. It is the stuff that information officers do. It is associated with information technologies that people encounter and turn on everyday. In our age of spin, 24/7 news, brands, publicity tours, media politics, and information technologies in virtually every living space, hardly anybody who works in development organizations needs to be persuaded that information matters.

For centuries, academics, philosophers, and essayists have vigorously discussed the broad meanings of communication. They also warned about the perils of information reductionism, that is, making communication synonymous with information transmission, production, reception, or technologies. Communication is about the potential transformative power of the exchange of ideas, deliberation and negotiation over a myriad common and private affairs, and participation in public life. However, the hegemony of the idea of 'communication qua information' suggests that comprehensive understandings of communication remain a well-kept secret from the lay public. Communication is still basically locked into the information paradigm.

The issue is not whether communication is perceived as making a contribution to the MDGs, but rather, what kind of communication is often expected and funded.

There is no shortage of development programmes with communication components. Experiences in advocacy for the MDGs are particularly illuminating. From lobbying to media campaigns, low- and high-profile advocacy efforts continue to take place. Awareness-raising activities among governments and influential publics in the North and the South are aimed at renewing

commitment and increasing funding for development policies. Organizations are actively mobilized to achieve two central advocacy goals.

First, they intend to bring attention to specific issues (e.g. gender-based violence, dramatic gaps in the rate of school drop-outs between boys and girls, the devastating impact of the AIDS crisis among orphans and young children). Second, they aim to advocate for specific policies (e.g. making anti-retroviral drugs available to people living with AIDS, passing and enforcing laws against sexual violence, funding the development and introduction of new vaccines). With the hope of influencing public debates and policy priorities, cadres of journalists and media activists exchange ideas about expanding and improving coverage of development issues.

These activities are premised on the idea that advocacy is fundamental to affecting policies in order to provide a conducive environment for pro-poor programmes. Without appropriate policies and adequate funding, redressing social conditions at the ground level is more difficult and less sustainable. Without involving decision-makers and opinion leaders, generating social change in communities is exceedingly problematic.

Unfortunately, too often advocacy is caught up on information premises, assuming that disseminating information about an issue or programme is sufficient to build support. Information alone is unlikely to move actors to action. Furthermore, disseminating information may, at best, only have short-term impact. What is needed is a nuanced understanding of how decision-making processes work, and what incentives and rewards to support development policies exist among key publics.

Successful experiences show that, more than one-shot informational activities, broad grassroots coalitions are necessary to sustain momentum for development causes. Information activities to gain visibility and inform stakeholders are only one among many strategies (e.g. putting pressure, engaging leaders, mobilizing communities) to gain support. The remarkable progress made by the global AIDS movement for the past two decades shows that successful communication is more than the production of a series of brochures to influence policy decisions. It requires multiple forms of communication work, including collaboration between medical experts and lay talent, a diversity of media forums, the mobilization of celebrities and 'anonymous' champions, the empowerment of people living with AIDS, the strengthening of community networks, and so on.

Only then can advocacy avoid falling into the all-too-common, flavour-of-the-month approach to setting development agendas: from high peaks to quietly disappearing from the public eye. As long as development initiatives have weak roots among stakeholders and communities, information campaigns are likely to be just flash-in-the-pan activities that are, predictably, replaced by other priorities and distractions.

The limits of the information paradigm are also found in communication programmes intended to influence the knowledge, attitudes and practices of communities. There is no shortage of so-called 'communication' materials to increase knowledge about a myriad of issues. Consider health literacy interventions to support programmes such as the promotion of oral rehydration salts, breastfeeding, vaccination, and institutional childbirth. A growing body of evidence shows that, if properly designed and implemented, messages are effective in increasing knowledge and understanding of the benefits of ideal behaviours. As long as institutional and logistical obstacles to action are low (e.g. distance to health clinics, power to choose type of healthcare, availability and trust of health staff and medicines), messages can effectively promote healthy actions.

However, 'messaging' is not the only way by which communication can effectively assist development initiatives. When factors other than information strongly deter people from key practices, then the focus should be different. Just to mention some examples. Although stigma has been found to deter people from getting timely diagnosis for tuberculosis, conventional activities continue to give information about symptoms and treatment as if that should prompt people to action. When parents decide to take their daughters out of school for a variety of reasons (e.g. they undervalue the worth of girls' education, girls are afraid of sexual violence on the way to school and at school), communication should be expected to do more than just tell people 'send your girl to school'. When women who receive micro-credits become the target of violence by relatives and partners (who seek to extract money), it is absurd to expect that messages promoting the availability of loans will turn loan programmes into viable opportunities.

These cases suggest that many development challenges go deeper than lack of knowledge or misinformation. Only if problems and solutions are properly assessed can the potential contributions of communication be better defined.

Likewise, when communication programmes are endowed with the task of changing attitudes and social norms, the challenges are complex. Those challenges raise a host of ethical issues regarding the role of communication in cultural change (e.g. Who decides? What values should be supported? How to reconcile ideals crystallized in the MDGs with local beliefs?).

Leaving the ethical implications of communication interventions aside (a topic that deserves a separate discussion in its own right), my own interest is in calling attention to the insufficiencies of conventional information approaches to tackling deep-seated social norms and cultural beliefs. Typical messages that trumpet the virtues of alternative beliefs and practices are hardly sufficient to spearhead change. Facilitating change in patterns of sexual violence and childbirth practices, decisions about the size of families and child-feeding behaviours, or the assignation of insecticide-treated nets and financial resources for healthcare among household members, is not mainly a matter of strategic messaging. Underlying such practices are complex power dynamics, gender roles, and religious beliefs. Only a good understanding of how social norms persist and change in specific communities can provide guidelines for communication approaches that are adequate.

Programs to eliminate female genital mutilation (FGM) provide valuable examples to illustrate the kind of contributions that communication can make. 'Get people talking' about the issue through appropriate channels (from community meetings to radio programmes) is indispensable to raising

awareness, assessing the situation and causes, recognizing points of resistance, engaging leaders, motivating disempowered voices, and discussing courses of action.

This process not only helps to nurture a sense of local ownership, which is crucial for global initiatives to gain long-term 'traction', but it also offers an opportunity for communities to discuss sensitive cultural issues and dynamics underpinning FGM: sexual initiation and 'rites of passage', perceptions about the role of young girls, norms about marriage, and networks of family dependency.

Likewise, the recent experience of polio campaigns also illustrate that the contributions of communication go well beyond information messaging. Only when political leaders in northern Nigeria decided to halt the campaigns because of doubts and rumours about vaccine safety and the intention of the eradication programme, or families in some states in Northern India actively resisted and avoided immunization teams, did global polio partners realize that a different kind of communication intervention was needed. Announcing vaccination dates and places through appropriate local media was insufficient. It failed to address existing concerns and widespread mistrust about top-down programmes. What was needed was to engage communities in dialogue about immunization, address perceived needs, negotiate the staffing of vaccination teams, and the like.

## Conclusion

That the field of communication has a role to play in global efforts to achieve the MDGs seems beyond doubt. Development institutions with diverse mandates (health, poverty reduction, sustainable livelihoods, environmental protection) typically count on some kind of communication expertise. That expertise is often expected simply to perform informational duties such as produce press releases and design media campaigns. No question, such interventions are often necessary and can be effective in disseminating basic information to help people make better informed decisions.

However, addressing some of the most difficult development issues requires a different approach. Health experts typically do not conclude that mothers prefer to give birth at home because they lack information about clinics, or that malaria kills thousands daily because communities are not aware that mosquitoes kill. Education specialists frequently attribute dropout rates to several factors other than families ignoring the potential benefits of education.

From appalling infrastructural deficiencies to the persistent inability of states to deliver services and control runaway violence, a host of issues account for some formidable obstacles on the road to the MDGs by 2015. Rarely do diagnoses demonstrate that information gaps are major

contributors to abysmal health and educational conditions. However, communication is still expected to deliver information messages. Consequently, interventions and messages are frequently understood as opportunities to express development wishes ('get your child vaccinated', 'stop sexual violence', 'get tested for HIV') rather than opportunities to engage communities in the identification of problems and solutions. Moving from reality to ideal conditions and behaviours requires more than announcing the desirability of the MDGs.

Sustainable development requires interventions that resonate with people's concerns, survival strategies, perceived risks, information needs, and cultural practices. Communication has much to contribute in this regard. To maximize its potential contributions, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of the 'magic information bullet' mentality as well as the analytical and programmatic richness of the field of communication.

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