

Communications Congress Starts a Worldwide Conversation

November 9, 2006—“Go home and listen to your people,” was the advice of a [major gathering](#) in Rome last week.

The concept of development as an economically driven but socially constrained discipline took a big step forward last week as the first [World Congress on Communication for Development \(WCCD\)](#) took place in Rome Oct. 25–27.

Take a video visit
to the WCCD

When development programs don't work, it is frequently due to a lack of consultation, participation, and, well, listening would be a good word for it, research shows.

A better appreciation of the strategic role of communications in development is rapidly changing what leaders can do, and what input local people can have, particularly through information and communications technology (ICT) tools.

“Giving people a voice, helping them to make that voice heard, only then does development become sustainable,” said Jacques Diouf, [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#) Director-General, one of the Congress's sponsors along with the Bank. “It also helps to be a good listener because there is much to be learned from the other side.”

Indeed, Jose Ramos Horta, the Prime Minister of Timor Leste, described at the opening plenary how he uses his cell phone and text messages to stay in touch with citizens all over his country— “Everyone has my phone number,” he said, “and even the most illiterate people know more about technology than I do.” In fact, he got a call in Rome from a Timor Leste street vendor asking him to send police to him, and responded immediately.



The Bank's Development Communications team, organizers of the WCCD, gather at its conclusion. First row, center, Paul Mitchell, manager; to his left, Lucia Grenna, the senior communications officer who led the effort

Better Results

Some 750 delegates from almost 200 organizations and 200 media representatives from more than 90 countries came together for the congress at the FAO headquarters, to examine how the outcomes of government programs can be enhanced and sometimes saved from outright failure by building in two-way communication from the start.

“Communication is development”, said Patrizia Sentinelli, Italian deputy minister of foreign affairs, who delivered a speech at the WCCD opening ceremony. “We want to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, we want to eradicate poverty, not only economic, financial poverty, but we want the social rights of poor countries to be recognized and not forgotten. Communication is at the very heart of this social dimension of rights, and this is the reason why communication goes hand in hand with development,” she said.



"Communication is development," said Patrizia Sentinelli, Italian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, speaking at the WCCD opening ceremony

Sharing their insights, innovations, and determination, communications professionals from all the leading bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, civil society, academia, foundations, and the private sector engaged policy-makers, sector experts and media representatives in intense discussions about how to achieve better results for development projects.

Four major themes—health, governance and anticorruption, sustainable development and communications labs—were explored in 135 juried [research papers](#), symposia, workshops, and media interviews.



Paul Mitchell, Manager of Development Communications

TV Coverage from the BBC—and Youth

Media coverage and participation were not lacking either. One of the plenaries was turned over to the BBC to film a lively [World Debate](#) panel on whether a free media is essential to development. The result is now being shown on BBC television, internet, and radio World Service to an audience estimated at over 200 million. Daniel Kaufmann, Global Programs director at WBI, represented the Bank on the panel next to Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Kumi Nadoo, Secretary General of CIVICUS, Hilde Frajord Johnson, senior advisor to the president of the African Development Bank, and Dr. Tonnie Osa Iredia, director general of the Nigerian Television Authority.

Also filming the World Congress was a team of three “rehabilitated” (in their words) street youths straight from the Kibera slums of Nairobi, Kenya, part of a hands-on educational approach to exploring their world with video cameras pioneered by the civil society organization [AMREF's](#) Dagoretti Child in Need project. Their creative work and the Bank's support of the [1 World Manga/Animé series](#) aimed for young people were the subject of a standing-room-only seminar.

CommNet for the World

“A truly magnificent group of Bank staff from Development Communications (DevComm) worked on this Congress for more than a year, based on an idea from Lucia Grenna,” said EXT Development Communication division manager Paul Mitchell in [his blog](#) from Rome, “and I doubt the Congress could have been sustained without her tenacity.”

Grenna, a senior communications officer and, like most other Bank staff attending, a founding member of the Communications Network, in turn praised the vision and generosity of the Italian Government. She said, “DevComm may be small, but it is influential. I definitely feel that communication is becoming increasingly important in the development agenda.”



John Muiruri, manager for African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) in Kenya, describes the Dagoretti Child in Need program to help street kids use videography to communicate their lives and perspectives, with Henri Kangete, Elizabeth Nyawira and Nicholas Kori, who shot a participatory video of the Congress

A communications senior advisor, WBI's Sunetra Puri, commented, “This is way beyond the Bank's Communications Network annual forum—this is CommNet for the world.”

In fact, over the past year some 80 organizations from academia, civil society, the donor community, governmental, inter-governmental organizations, and the U.N. system were involved in the Congress preparation

as part of the Steering Committee, Scientific Committee, and Advisory Body.

Less Propaganda, More Outreach

So what is the result? As the final WCCD communiqué put it, “Less propaganda, more outreach efforts. Fewer monologues, more two-way, participatory dialogues. In the end, this means increased transparency and improved governance, better access to health services and education, fairer treatment of minorities, and gender equity, to name just a few improvements.”

The World Congress on Communication for Development was hosted and mainly funded by the Government of Italy through its Foreign Ministry, and organized by the World Bank, [Development Communication Division](#) (DevComm), the Food and Agriculture Organization’s [Communication for Development](#) group and the [Communication Initiative Network](#), an online community. The Congress produced a [Rome Consensus document](#).

An [overview](#) of the WCCD results and participation is available. For more information, please see the WCCD website, or contact Lucia Grenna. A CD set of the Congress papers, television programs and videos will be available.