

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
FOR THE DESIGN OF AGRICULTURAL POLICIES
AND FOR THEIR IMPLEMENTATION ¹

by

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1. Foreword

For more than 30 years, rural development has been a challenge for both developing and developed countries. Since the early 1970s, this spatial and multi-sector concept has been used to focus the particular problems faced by rural communities, but there is still much more to be done.

According to World Bank estimates, 1.2 billion people still live with less than one dollar per day and many more have limited access to basic life needs. Approximately 75% of the poor are found in rural areas. Their quality of life, by most indicators, is worse than in towns because rural public services are half those of urban areas. The rural poor have been classified into five categories: i) the landless, ii) those with small assets, iii) nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists, iv) women heads-of-families and v) ethnic minorities and indigenous populations. Almost 1.3 billion people live in areas classified as environmentally fragile (World Bank 2002a), most of which are classified as rural.

The very concept of 'rural' - as opposed to urban - is unclear and very difficult to define. Scholars from many different backgrounds (economists, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.) have tried to define what is 'rural' without agreeing on

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any sure and undisputed definition. All types of variables (physical, human, economic) have been considered, to define and stratify rural areas, with different needs and goals, using multi-criteria approaches.

Even within a same country, rural areas do not present the same features and have extremely different characteristics and trends. Disparities may be very large, in terms of ecological aspects, human typologies and settlements, economic variables, past trends and future potentialities. Rural areas closer to small towns and cities can participate in the growing labor market and farmers can produce high value horticultural crops for the urban consumers. Sometimes, remittance from emigrants allows rural families to overcome difficulties and even to make small investments. Some rural areas are classified as natural parks and intensive agriculture is not possible, but organic farming and rural tourism could represent good opportunities, whereas other areas could have better perspectives for agro-food industries. Water scarcity affects large parts of rural areas, thus setting limits on human settlements, agricultural or animal carrying capacity and industrial development, while other areas are characterized by deforestation or erosion.

Another important vector of heterogeneity is of an institutional nature: not all ministries in all countries have the same level of efficiency and effectiveness, and the governance structure is not the same everywhere. Some countries are more centralized than others, and furthermore the type of delegation may vary considerably. The same diversity happens in the civil society and in the private sector where some associations are very strong and they already provide good services, while other associations still need time and assistance to develop the same level of services.

Taking into account all these aspects, development policies for rural areas are marked by very different perspectives, sectors of intervention, and goals. Some policies tend to focus only on agriculture, whereas other policies have a more articulated food chain approach. Other policies recognize the need for infra-structural investments first, in order to reduce some bottlenecks that impede economic growth. In other cases, diversification of the economic structure has been sought and non agricultural activities have been pursued in order to create a wealth that the primary sector alone can not generate. In some other cases, major emphasis has been given to structural problems, such as access to land or land registration, or to institutional aspects, such as public sector reform or institution building.

In recent years, growing emphasis has been put on the local dimensions of rural development, with emerging concepts such as community driven development, participatory project design and evaluation, decentralization, empowerment of local authorities and communities, involvement of civil society organizations, and so forth. Another significant change can be found in the words defining the people involved in projects or policies: they were once defined as “beneficiaries”, evidently supposed to benefit forever and always from the actions of the governments, or they were militarily classified as “target groups”, or even as “addressees” (*destinataires* in French or *destinatarios* in Spanish); in all cases, these definitions reveal a top-down approach, placing the people in an almost passive role, expecting the development to come from

outside or from above. Later on, once the failures or the limitations of these concepts became clear, new words appeared and are presently widely used: “clients” and “stakeholders”; The first one reveals an evident commercial relationship between the individuals or groups and the supplier of a given service (the advisor? the facilitator? the educator? the government?), while the latter is more undefined and also opens the door to categories not directly influenced by the policy. For example, the stakeholders in a biodiversity project in Mexico could be advocacy NGOs in the USA or in Europe.

The stakeholders of rural development are consequently quite numerous, but the relative importance of each category very much depends on the particular situation. A likely list of stakeholders includes several different categories of agricultural producers (men and women peasants, landless peasants, farmers and ranchers, landlords), informal and formal rural leaders (teachers, clergy, local level union cadres, etc.), local formal institutions (municipalities, districts, etc.), local and national Non Governmental Organizations, national ministries and authorities with different interests, financial institutions, private companies, product associations and non agricultural economic associations, universities and research centers, foreign NGOs working in the country and projects financed by a variety of different sources, general public, local and national radio and TV stations, local and national policy makers, etc.

The design of policies for sustainable agriculture and rural development requires a comprehensive approach, which could enhance the energies of all stakeholders and provide the necessary tools for overcoming difficulties.

2. Strategic communication for sustainable development

Almost everybody is aware about the need for communication to obtain good results. Yet, very often this belief only refers to old fashioned agricultural extension type activities, i.e. technical or socio-economic advice, spread to male and female farmers, once a policy or a project has entered into the phase of implementation. Most people are convinced that communication activities only need to be implemented during the life cycle of the project, from identification and formulation, to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. There is an increasing awareness that both internal and external communication should be carefully planned, implemented and continuously improved.

Our thesis is that the above-mentioned activities, although very important, are not enough: sometimes, they are fruitless and uselessly costly, because the policies or the projects had been poorly conceived.

Communication should be an integral part of policy design procedures, starting from the very beginning, whenever a new policy (for a commodity, a resource, a sector or an entire area) needs to be formulated, or an old policy needs to be reformulated, in order to meet the challenges of our ever changing societies. Strategic communication is a comprehensive and holistic vision of the communication activities needed for designing and implementing a successful policy.

Strategic communication ensures that development policies are properly designed, with the participation of all concerned parties, that their goals are to some extent shared by all stakeholders and consequently that their implementation will very likely be successful.

Strategic communication, whenever implemented during the policy formulation, should not be considered a cost but a resource-saving device, because it reduces the risks of less than optimal design, wrong measures, poor implementation, poor results, and even social unrest in the countryside or towns.

3. Strategic communication and participation in policy formulation

In order to formulate a shared economic policy and to achieve some common goals, it is important to bring together all institutions, groups, associations, formal and informal, which to some extent will be touched, involved or affected by the policy. Some of them represent the core groups of the policy design, such as the representatives of some national ministries and agencies. It is also important to identify and involve categories or groups which traditionally were not considered as partners, but only as “targets” or “beneficiaries”.

All civil society organizations could be involved: parent associations, cultural groups, consumer unions, and worker unions. An important form of social capital, with ramifications in all strata of the population, is represented by the political parties or by the different orientations within the same party; also in situations of bitter competition, involvement of all major parties, either involved in the government or in the opposition, should be sought and achieved. It is important to go beyond traditional involvement and open the policy formulation and implementation to new groups which had never been involved.

On the other hand, we have to recognize that not all stakeholders are the same and that there are different levels of involvement and different types of participation, which are briefly described here below.

- **Level of involvement:** refers to what is really sought with the participation of the stakeholders. Three major levels of involvement are normally described: a) **information:** using various methods and media, stakeholders are simply informed that something is going on, that a policy is being elaborated, or that a project is going to happen, decided by somebody else; this form of participation increases awareness, stimulates attention and future adhesion, but it is clearly insufficient, as far as participatory policy design is concerned; b) **consultation:** stakeholders cooperate in analyzing the situation (natural, social, economic, technical, etc.), in listing the priorities, in elaborating feasible solutions and they suggest actions and strategies, but the final decision remains within the power of the technocrats of the government; c) **decision making:** this happens whenever stakeholders are fully empowered and they can decide what to do and how to use the available

resources; this last option is evidently the most empowering, but it is also the most difficult to implement, because it moves the final decision from the hands of the government to the hands of the stakeholders.

- **Types of participation:** they can basically be **direct** or **indirect**. The first means that all individuals of a given group are invited to participate, while the second means that only representatives take part in the activities. Another aspect to consider is how the representatives are selected: they could be elected for the specific activity, or they could be formal representatives. In some cases, there are easy solutions: for example, whenever the Ministry of Agriculture wants to organize a forum with producers associations, a letter of invitation is sent to all registered associations and they send a representative. In other cases, it could be more difficult; for example, if the government wants to establish a plan of action for an entire region, it is not possible to organize meetings with the entire population; consequently the problem of inviting only one or two representatives per village arises. Who should they be? The community president or somebody chosen by the community for this specific event? Should be women represented? And a representation of the youth? It is not possible to provide a blanket recommendation: it is important to be aware of this problem, and to anticipate possible causes of conflict, due to exclusion;
- **Forms of participation:** during situation analysis and policy formulation, the most used formats are meetings and workshops with representatives, working groups with experts, open meetings with the entire population; information can also be given through the most diffused media, with press conferences, press releases, full articles and special supplements. Increasingly, news about the ongoing elaboration may be made public through a web page, inviting people to send comments and suggestions via email;
- **Procedures:** should ensure that stakeholders can participate; events should be planned in due advance, on appropriate days and times and all participants should be informed; objectives and the agenda of meetings should be communicated in advance; necessary documentation should be made available; there should be sufficient time to allow all participants to express their opinions and suggestions; the number of participants should not be excessive or the whole group could be split into smaller working groups; the results of the meetings should be stated in final formal documents and constitute the platform for the next meeting, memos with the outcome of the meetings should be prepared and sent as soon as possible to those absent;
- **Practical arrangements:** refer to proper space for accommodating all invited people, to the positioning of tables, chairs and visual aids to allow everyone to hear and see also from the most distant places; to refreshments and eventually catering for all participants at the meetings or conferences.

4. Strategic communication in policy implementation

Once the policy enters into implementation, several communication activities are needed. These activities have to take into account the types of policies, the technical content of the messages related to such policies, the level of education and the information needs of the stakeholders. The full set of methods and media could be used, from the most traditional labor intensive visit to farmers (agricultural extension) to radio and TV, from the most traditional communication methods and media (folk theater, story tellers or puppet theater) to information technology. As seen before, since the policies may be extremely heterogeneous, there should be a strategy and a proper plan of action, in order to elaborate, transmit and receive feedback to and from each stakeholder. Furthermore, since many agricultural or rural development policies are articulated into several projects, with components and subcomponents, it may happen that they are implemented by several different agencies, with different size, scope, interests, geographical coverage and communication capabilities. Given this complexities, the communication activities of the agencies should at least be coordinated and have some shared objectives.

All these activities require financial resources and are of fundamental importance for the success of the overall policy. Consequently, the communication activities should be subject to specific funding and to adequate monitoring and evaluation.

5. Methods and media

There are several classifications to analyze the different ways for involving the stakeholders and favoring their participation in the development process. The following classification distinguishes between methods and media⁵, with a slight overlap when communication aids are considered⁶.

The **methods** include all events with an interpersonal contact, whenever one person or a multitude is exposed to one or more persons in charge of the communication activities. The methods can be classified as follows:

- **Individual methods:** whenever one stakeholder only is contacted through an office, home or farm visit, or the person comes to the office for a face-to-face exchange of opinions. Another common version is to invite the stakeholder to a face-to-face business meeting in a comfortable place, such as a restaurant. Communication can be very effective, dense of interaction, with continuous feedback;

⁵ Media is the plural form of the Latin word *medium* = mean; communication media are all physical means used to communicate. In some cases, the word *mediums* can be found, as plural of *medium*, but it is a mistake made by some persons in modern American-English.

⁶ In some textbooks or manuals, the word *channel* is often used as synonymous for method or media, but this is a misleading mistake. Another different concept is that of *format*, i.e. the specific shape of the same medium. For example, a radio program can have different formats: 5', 10', 30', different periodicity and different internal time use, etc.

- **Group methods:** whenever a small group of people meets the person in charge of communication. In this category we find all different types of meetings and workshops, press conferences, study tours, method and result demonstrations, structured courses of various types. The possibility of interaction decreases, some people participate more than others, feed back is little, but on the positive side we have there is the interaction amongst the participants themselves;
- **Mass events:** whenever a very large number of people is superficially reached, exposing them to some new concept, although the possibility of interaction is considerably smaller than in the group events. In this category we find conferences, fairs, field days, open days, information trains, information booths, all events attended by hundreds or thousands of people.

Then there are the communication means or **media**, more or less simple or complex, that amplify or replace interpersonal communication. The media can be classified as follows:

- **Communication aids**, such as slide projectors, overhead projectors, computer + projector combinations, maps and other posters, scale models, blackboards, flip board, etc., all tools used to improve the quality of the interpersonal communication during group or mass events;
- **Printed media**, based on both written words and images, which in most cases are used to replace personal communication and which also allow the individual to store the information for future use, such as leaflets, booklets, handbooks, magazines, calendars, press releases, articles in the independent press, posters and comics books;
- **Electronic media**, like radio, TV and obviously internet, which represents the future of mass and individual communication;
- **Traditional media**, like Chinese shadows, puppets, story tellers, theater, *dramatizações*, which are being considered again for spreading modern messages towards particular groups of stakeholders.

All methods and media have advantages and disadvantages, which make their utilization feasible or impossible during policy formulation and in its implementation. They must be selected accordingly to the typology of stakeholders, their cultural level and communication behavior, the nature and complexity of the messages, the purpose of the communication.

The value and efficacy of methods and media depend on the cost – benefit analysis of their utilization, i.e. comparing the human and financial costs with the quantity, nature and relevance of the results. There is no blueprint recipe for the best mix of methods and

media, but they must be selected after careful analysis which should consider at least the following aspects:

- number of stakeholders to involve
- typologies of stakeholders and their geographical distribution
- goal, with respect to the policy formulation and implementation process
- difficulty of the content of the communication (that is generally linked to the complexity of the topic to debate, the policy to develop or to implement)
- available media and communication behavior of stakeholders
- available resources

Some final suggestions

Adopting communications for development into policy formulation does not appear to be a tremendous task, nor it seems that it could determine a cost increase. Almost all ministries and agencies already have communication units which produce an impressive variety of printed material, contribute to radio programs, use TV ads, have public relation activities, but generally with little planning and almost no monitoring and evaluation. Sometimes there is a waste of resources and slow improvement. For this reason, some of the following suggestions could appear even too simple. With a little effort and some professional skills, great improvements are possible.

- **Establish a communication for development unit:** a communication for development unit should be established, in order to approach the communication problems from the very beginning. This unit should have two main tasks: a) to ensure that communication activities are properly envisioned and budgeted, for interacting with other technical expertise and b) to ensure that proper communication activities are also implemented, during the policy formulation talks, so as to favor full and conscious participation of all likely stakeholders;
- **Establish a team of communicators:** whenever a policy will involve more than one ministry or agency, at least one person per institution should be designated as a member of the communication coordination team, either during its formulation or later during its implementation;
- **Identify likely stakeholders:** the various groups of stakeholders should be identified and described, both qualitatively and quantitatively, because this information is fundamental for the design of the economic and technical parts of the agricultural policies, and even more for the communication strategy. Social and economic variables can be used in this exercise, so as to have a clear vision about who will be involved in the policy formulation and implementation.
- **Develop a communication audit:** stakeholders are already receiving information, about several subjects, from existing sources: radio and TV stations, newspapers and magazines, NGOs, other ministries, political parties, friends and family members, traders and shop owners. The knowledge of what information is

available and what is used and appreciated by the stakeholders is extremely relevant for designing an effective communication strategy;

- **Design a baseline of opinions and beliefs, attitudes and knowledge:** the objective of all policies is to change the present situation and they will indirectly introduce some modifications in people's attitudes and behaviors. Agricultural projects are planned to increase yields, while land titling projects need to convince the people to collaborate in registration activities; conservation projects need to convince farmers to practice more environmentally friendly agricultural techniques, while other projects try to stop rural people from killing endangered species. All these are technical objectives: higher productivity, more income, less erosion, plots registered, higher number of wild animals, etc. These objectives can only be achieved if the individuals and the communities are willing and able to implement some suggested behavior. Yet, behavior is influenced by beliefs, attitudes and knowledge. At the moment of policy formulation, the actual situation should therefore be properly described, also in terms of what people think about institutions and about their living conditions, about their perceived problems, perspectives and beliefs;
- **Set quantitative communication objectives:** once the baseline has been designed, intermediate and final quantitative targets should be established, to be reached after some period of time. These intermediate and final targets are the primary objectives of the communication activities and should not be confused with the technical or economic objectives of the policy (increased income, improved water use efficiency, reduced overgrazing, etc.). As a matter of fact, achievement of the technical objectives is not only due to improved knowledge or change of opinions, but also to contemporary factors, such as availability of inputs, market fluctuations, climatic conditions, political stability, and so forth. . It has been proven that on many occasions the knowledge of the people had been properly improved, and that they had developed a pro-active desire to change, but change did not occur due to other impediments. Establishing appropriate indicators and monitoring their evolution represent two steps to determine if (eventual) lack of behavioral change was due to poor communication or to other causes;
- **Formulate a strategy and then a program of communication activities:** the overall strategy describes the main purposes and the directives for the communication activities, their major orientations and motivations, while the annual program of activities enters into more specific details;
- **Specify a budget for communication:** the resources available for communication activities should be clearly established and allocated and their utilization properly respected;

- **Establish monitoring and evaluation procedures:** continuous monitoring and evaluation is fundamental for the smooth management of any agency. All media to be produced in large number should be pre-tested before their multiplication, so as to avoid spending resources on incomprehensible messages; if the communication strategy has been converted into a program of activity, checking its implementation comes easily, in terms of output production, and consequently the use of the budget. Impact evaluation should also be planned, via specific surveys, focus groups and opinion polls;
- **Educate for communication:** short training courses should be organized, in all institutions, for high level officials and for technical staff, about participatory communication techniques; most of these people are aware of the relevance of good communication, but they lack the skills needed;
- **Ensure internal communication:** knowledge management systems should be put in place to ensure that knowledge generated during the policy formulation and later during its implementation is fruitfully shared and not lost. The flow of knowledge should be horizontal (between partner institutions), vertical (between the different layers of a same institution), diachronic (through time) and should favor feed back mechanisms.

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