

# New Wine in an Old Bottle: Community-Based Development Communication

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Book Review of **Community-Based Communication:  
A New Approach to Development Communication**

By Jude William R. Genilo

Quezon City: Great Books Publishing, 2005 (179 pp)



Any book that aims to provide an alternative approach to doing things necessarily creates two expectations among its readers: 1) that it would be able to explain why past and present approaches are inappropriate or insufficient; and consequently, 2) that it would be able to show why/how the approach it proposes is better than the existing ones. The book *Community-based communication: A new approach to development communication* by Jude William Genilo adequately meets both expectations.

Generically, “development communication commonly refers to the application of communication strategies and principles in the developing world. It is derived from theories of development and social change that identified the main problems of the post-war world in terms of a lack of development or progress equivalent to Western countries” (Waisbord 2000: 1). This is according to Dr. Silvio Waisbord, a professor at Rutgers University who wrote a paper on the topic for the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>1</sup> However, the concepts of *development*, *communication*, and *development communication* have undergone radical changes – paradigm shifts according to Genilo – since the 1940s.

Genilo begins his book by providing an interesting historical account of development efforts in the country, particularly those pertaining to rice farming. Assessing these development initiatives, the author notes that: “Despite the efforts of past and present governments and a strong agricultural research and development network, rice production in the country has failed to achieve high growth rates on a sustainable basis” (3-4).

One of the main factors behind this failure is the weak link between research centers and extension agencies, on the one hand, and the rice farmers, on the other. This is primarily because the research centers and extension agencies have not properly understood their role in the cycle of rice farming. As Genilo points out (136):

Research centers view themselves as the source of agricultural innovations and technologies. They are somewhat detached from farmers and do not consider local innovations and technologies. Extension agencies, on the other hand, describe themselves as interpreters and disseminators of agricultural innovations and technologies (developed by research centers). Extension agencies simply promote modern innovations and technologies without considering locally available technologies.

Given such situation, it is not surprising that farmers see extension agencies as “purveyors of modern technologies” and not as “partners in crop production” (136). The unfortunate consequence is that farmers remain unconvinced about the benefits of the technologies that the research centers/extension agencies espouse.

The author then contextualizes this problem from a development communication perspective, because it is through communication that the research centers and extension agencies disseminate agricultural innovations and technologies to rice farmers. Genilo starts by identifying the different development communication efforts that have been launched in an effort to influence rice farmers to adopt modern farming technologies. The author classifies the various communication strategies as media-based, participatory, information technology, and knowledge-based strategies.

Overall, the author is able to adequately explain these strategies; however, the media-based strategy, as he clarifies it seems to be more of an innovation/technology transfer process than a media use strategy. Moreover, in his discussion of the factors that affect the choice of communication strategy to be used in particular extension activities, the author fails to consider the role of turf issues. That is, among the many government agencies and non-government organizations operating in the development arena, separate or parochial interests often dictate what strategies to use. Questions such as what would be relevant and appropriate for the target beneficiaries are overshadowed. This results in the fragmentation of development communication efforts, leading to what one may call a low return-on-investment situation.

Genilo also looks at the weaknesses of existing development communication efforts in terms of their impact on the rice farmers. In connection with this, he poses several questions vis-à-vis what roles communication plays in the formation of collective definitions and in the construction, modification, and sharing of knowledge and practices on rice farming.

The author discusses the communication dynamics primarily in terms of the symbolic interactionism framework, which focuses on how people construct and negotiate reality in a social setting. In the case of the rice farmers confronted with choices of farming technologies, their decision regarding which technology to adopt and which one to discard is arrived at after an assessment of the probable benefits each choice would bring not only to him but also to his family, neighbors, and friends who would come to share his luck or misfortune in rice farming. Such process of decision-making underscores two points: 1) farmers and other beneficiaries could ascribe importance and significance to technological information differently from the way the same information is valued by research centers and extension agencies and 2) informal communication networks can sometimes work as well as, if not better than, formal ones in influencing people to adopt new technologies.

To further illustrate weaknesses in existing development communication efforts, the author examines the multi-purpose cooperative and its functions in a community. A cooperative is supposed to work for the benefit of its members. However, the many cases of cooperative failures in the country strongly suggest that cooperatives are not fulfilling this function. It appears that instead of supporting farmers and representing their interests, cooperatives operate as distinct entities that, in some instances, are even perceived to subvert the interests of their members. For instance, conflict often arises between management and members regarding money matters; and among cooperative members, on how loans should be availed of and how they should be paid. This conflict stems from differences in the members' expectations regarding what financial support they should get from the cooperative and how they should make use of the loan. The conflict is aggravated when members do not trust the other members' sincerity in repaying their loans and their capability to do so. Such conflict could have been avoided, or at least minimized, if the members' roles in, obligations to, and expectations from the cooperative were clarified prior to its formal establishment.

It is at this point that Genilo argues for an alternative approach to development communication that moves away from diffusion and participatory models. The model that he presents is, expectedly, envisioned to address the abovementioned weaknesses and gaps in existing development communication efforts. Genilo's definition of – and model for – development communication is a community-based one; that is, communities engage in activities that are social in nature; communities engage in social activities that are dynamic; and the construction of social activities is communication-dependent. The model has seven key concepts: awareness, definition, incorporation, institutionalization, communication, community, and time.

Elaborating on these concepts, Genilo forwards propositions regarding how community members process and evaluate new inputs (such as agricultural innovations), and how they choose from among the various innovations that are made available to them. As expected, Genilo highlights the role of communication – at various levels and through various channels – in these processes. In connection with this, the author stresses that development communication workers should build upon and strengthen a community's communication systems instead of replacing these with communication channels that they (the workers) deem as superior and more modern.

This book – particularly the model it presents – is a timely and appropriate reference material for development communication practitioners looking for a different perspective on enhancing the role of communication in development initiatives.

The book should also be useful and meaningful for communication evaluation scholars, who will find several significant heuristic insights in Genilo's model. Policy makers could also learn lessons from Genilo's account of

development initiatives through the years, particularly in terms of how the intentions of development-oriented entities are actually perceived by their target beneficiaries and how information inputs figure in the beneficiaries' decision-making activities. Finally, the book is an important contribution to the literature on rice farming not only in terms of the more technical aspect of the adoption of farming innovations, but also in terms of chronicling farming as a way of life of people who remain ever optimistic about the blessings from the earth, despite discouraging conditions and circumstances.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Rockefeller Foundation is an organization that describes itself as “a knowledge-based global foundation with a commitment to enrich and sustain the lives and livelihoods of poor and excluded people throughout the world”. (Rockefeller Foundation n.d.).

## References

- Waisbord, S. (2000). Family tree of theories, methodologies, and strategies in development communication. Paper prepared for The Rockefeller Foundation. Rockefeller Foundation. (n.d.). Mission and Vision. Retrieved February 3, 2004, from <http://www.rockfound.org/display.asp?context=2&sectiontypeid=32&Preview=0&ARCurrent=1>

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