

Communication advocates consensus, democracy, development, delivery



By [Thabani Khumalo](#)

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Communication can facilitate and accelerate development by encouraging and consolidating dialogue, debate and consensus, which ultimately strengthen democracy, development and delivery. Furthermore, it can give a voice to the poorest masses, thus enabling them to articulate their own development challenges, opportunities and aspirations.

A number of major international conferences have stressed the important role of development communication in their action plans of achieving sustainable development and a poverty-free society.

The Earth Summit (1992), International Conference on Population and Development (1994), World Summit for Social Development (1995), Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and World Food Summit (1996) all called for the strengthening of information, education, media operations and communication activities concerning population and sustainable development issues.

Why is development communication crucial?

The primary target of government-led development communication should be providing the poor and disadvantaged communities with information they can use in making public policies and programmes real, meaningful, inclusive, participative and sustainable.

Development communication promotes an exchange of knowledge and information, which stimulates mass awareness and motivation, allowing members of the public to take informed decisions on the crucial issues affecting their lives, as well as holding government and officials accountable. It creates an opportunity for government and experts to tap into ordinary people's expertise, experience and intelligence.

Again, it helps communities to determine their development agenda within their desires, dreams, needs, aspirations, opportunities, perceptions, perspectives and priorities, ultimately empowering them to assume ownership, responsibility, authority, and control over improvements to their areas and lives.

In short, development communication advocates a people-centered approach to development, within which communication forms a critical component.

Communication - key to good governance

While the role of communications is increasingly recognised in government policy statements, in practice communication remains a relatively under-prioritised area of the so-called 'good governance' agenda.

Effective communication is widely seen as a vital tool for connecting government's policy makers with citizens; disseminating development information; facilitating inclusive political systems; giving a 'voice' to poor and marginalised groups; enabling citizen's participation in development; holding leaders to account; rooting out corruption, conflict of interest, maladministration and poor performance; committing governments to delivering quality and strong service excellence culture, and producing a dedicated workforce.

The key to proven leadership and transparent governance is good communication.

Fewer PowerPoint presentations and more community meetings

Political commentator Imraan Buccus said that the one consistent problem that protesting communities face is a technocratic, top-down approach to policy formulation, planning and implementation that assumes that leaders and experts are making unilateral decisions on behalf of communities.

He argues that development requires "fewer PowerPoint presentations and more community meetings". Indeed, true.

Service delivery protests are in response to a crisis of local democracy rather than a crisis of local development. Government needs to take public participation seriously by recognising that ordinary people have every right to be engaged in the discussion, planning, implementation and evaluation of development that will affect their lives.

Through enhanced participation in governance, this emerging culture of public protests against a democratically elected government will be eliminated because people resolve to take to the streets out of frustration because there are no channels to discuss their challenges, concerns, views and aspirations with elected leadership.

Development communication ensures that public service and communication are inseparable, and that local resources are used wisely and effectively.

Communication, a tool for sustainable development

The shift in development thinking and practice towards people-centered programmes, and the participation of communities in decisions impacting on their lives, is creating new challenges for governments. While underdevelopment includes lack of access to basic human needs, such as decent shelter, [clean water](#), [nutrition](#), power, [health care](#), [education](#), opportunities, choice, clothing and food, it also includes lack of information and knowledge.

Communities therefore need to be empowered with development information in order to identify sustainable opportunities and development solutions that are within their reach, contexts, capabilities and capacities. Although often illiterate, poor people have wisdom, knowledge and practices based on deep-rooted cultural norms, traditions and values, as well as generations of experience.

When used effectively, communication acts as a mediation tool between development stakeholders, helping them to resolve conflicts, achieve consensus, find common ground for policies and actions to be taken, and create a platform for exchanging experiences and knowledge.

Communication, should I say development communication, lies at the heart of good governance, where governments are responsive, accountable and capable of fulfilling their functions with the active engagement of civil society. So, government should start managing communication as a strategic resource in its development agenda.

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