Civil Society and Media in the process of Development

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Civil Society

There are myriad definitions of civil society in the post-modern sense. The London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society's working definition is illustrative: Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

Whatever you call it – civil society, third sector, NGOs, social enterprises – it is the glue in society, a bastion of universal rights and pluralism, a source of citizens' engagement, sustainable development and social innovation across borders and boundaries.

Civil society organisations play a vital role in the development of a country. They contribute to policy shaping by the government by providing input at an early stage of the policy-making process. Civil society organisations also play the role of watchdog, holding public authorities accountable for delivering policies. They help to raise awareness on issues concerning development of the society like health, education, livelihood, etc. They also counterbalance the demand made by the market on the society and environment.

As far as the institutional approach, the UN has a long history of relation with non-state actors (Ó Siochrú, 2002) that dates back to article 71 of its funding Charter. Rules to regulate interaction with civil society actors were afterwards adopted by ECOSOC in 1950 (Res. 288B) and 1968 (Res. 1296), and redefined in 1996 (Res. 31). The mid-1990s was the time of the growing visibility of NGOs and their growing presence at UN conferences that started with Rio in 1992, and proceeded to Vienna (1993), Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995). During the Rio conference a first attempt to define the boundaries of the complex reality of 'civil society' was carried on through the identification of major groups, including gender, indigenous people, professionals, Research Objectives:

The broad objective of the study was to find out the fairness of the leading newspapers of Delhi in covering the proceedings of Delhi Legislative Assembly.

Specific objectives of the study were

i. To find out the coverage of Delhi legislative assembly in the Delhi newspapers.

ii. To make a qualitative analysis of the news of the proceedings of Delhi legislative Assembly covered in the Delhi Newspapers

iii. To find out the perception of the press people regarding the adequacy of the facilities for the press people in the Legislative Assembly.

iv. To study the perception of the press people regarding the coverage of the Legislative Assembly in the Delhi Newspapers.

v. To know the perception of the press people regarding the proceedings of Delhi Legislative assembly.

vi. To find out the perception of the MLAs regarding the coverage of the Delhi Legislative Assembly in the newspapers of Delhi.

NGOs; while the Commission on Global Governance was also considering such developments in its investigation and proposals. In 1998 UN Res. 53/170, speaking about civil society organizations, stated that they could 'no longer be seen only as disseminators of information, but as shapers of policy and indispensable bridges between the general public and intergovernmental processes ...' This path, together with a growing awareness of the need for a democratization of the UN system through a more open and participatory functioning, led to the recent work of the above-mentioned High Level Panel on UN–civil society relations, and its final output: 'We, the People: Civil Society, the United Nations and Global Governance' (June 2004).

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[1] "What is civil society?" Centre for Civil Society, Philippine Normal University. 2004-03-01. Retrieved 2006-10-30.

This institutional approach to civil society landed at WSIS through Resolution 56/183, which encouraged 'intergovernmental organization, non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector to contribute to, and actively participate in, the inter-governmental preparatory process of the Summit and the Summit itself'. Throughout the WSIS process the formula adopted was 'NGOs and civil society', thus differentiating between the two and recognizing that civil society is something different (and, as the process demonstrated, less defined) than NGOs.

Media and Communication

Media facilitates communication. Communication, at its basic level, is the activity of conveying meaningful information. It is a process by which meaning is assigned and conveyed in an attempt to create shared understanding.

As communication enables collaboration and cooperation, it can be a vital tool to strengthen democracy, increase the respect for human rights and assure transparency in implementation. By letting more people participate and strengthening the communication between all stakeholders the development process can be improved. However, despite the fact that a planned communication process is accepted as a key factor for success in many fields of the society, communication is still seldom applied as a strategic tool for goal fulfillment in development cooperation. There are two simple reasons for this: one, as communication is a tool, one needs to know how to handle and use the tool; and two: communication to be effective requires more than efficient handling; it requires credibility and of the message as well as the sender. Several other factors related to the sender, the receiver, the message content and the medium through which the message is being disseminated impact the efficacy of communication .

Development

Answer to the simple question, 'what is development' can differ from country to country, for it has subjec-tive, formative and cultural dimensions. Taking these into considerations- attempts have been made to have a universally acceptable definition. Attempts have also been made to quantify concepts like development and poverty. Development can be measured in terms of GDP, calorie intake, per capita spending, per capita energy consumption, etc. But any quantitative measure one applies will have its detractors and critics. Hence, it is prudent to define development with the help of yet another set of concepts: personal and social well-being, fulfillment of basic necessities like food, shelter, education, health services, communication facilities; a sense of security, peace, freedom of expression, freedom of choice, etc.

It will be pertinent to look at the UN definition of 'development', which reads: Development is a comprehensive, economic, social, cultural and political process which aims at the constant improvement of the wellbeing of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting there from.

The link

Communication and/or media (often these two terms are used interchangeably) is crucial in development – whether in the form of dissemination, guidelines, prescriptions, recommendations, advocacy, promotion, persuasion, education, conversation, roundtables, consultations, dialogue, counseling or entertainment. Sometimes, providing information is the most powerful strategy available. Information is a tool that helps people help themselves, in a 'fishing-pole-rather-than-fish' sort of way. Information is also the lever that people need to hold government accountable and to ensure transparency in participative and empowering processes. As one development communicator has put it 'They say sunlight is the best disinfectant, well let the sunlight in!'

But communication is often about more than providing information. It is about fostering social awareness and facilitating public democratic dialogue. It is about

[2]CLAUDIA PADOVANI & ARJUNA TUZZI, Communication Governance and the
Role of Civil Society: Reflections on Participation and the Changing Scope of Political Action, Towards a
Sustainable Information Society
[3]A list of such factors may include:
Sender: Credibility, Attitude,
Message: Credibility, Comprehensibility, applicability, Tone and tenor
Receiver: Cognitive level, Attitude
Medium: Accessibility, Perceptibility,
Other factors: Cultural homogeneity, Past experience

contributing to evidence-based policy, and about building a shared understanding which can lead to social change. It is about creating space for the voices of the poor to be heard, and, ultimately, it is about redistributing power.

As civil society has been doing it through media (if you take media in the larger umbrella of civil society), it has gained credibility over the years. People believe in what is being told and written and shown on media. They form their perception and then opinion on the basis of information, analysis and suggestion given by the media. It does not happen always, as a number of communication theories have pointed out . But it certainly happens often enough to have vested enormous power on media. Countless number of communication theories have established the fact that media can and do influence human thought and behaviour . From fashion to stardom to creating positive attitude for certain issues- media can influence, and therein lie its power.

The Pitfalls
However, these positive effects of communication do not come automatically. More communication does not automatically mean more development. More communication can simply end up as a form of 'pushing knowledge down a hosepipe, in the hope that at least some of it will come out the other end'. In fact, in certain situations, disempowering or esoteric communication dynamics can dramatically hinder development.

This is why it is important to communicate better. That requires the knowledge about some basic questions like: whom to communicate with, why to communicate and how to do that.

How to communicate better?
This requires clear understanding of several questions. The two basic questions are: communication with whom and why? Civil society is required to communicate in two different semantic spaces: that of internal dynamics within the civil society sector and that of interaction with the official process. A clear understanding of the recipient's profile, their communications need (both felt and latent), their cognitive level and capacity to retain and act upon communication, etc is required.

The other question that needs an answer is: why communicate? Answer to this question will throw light on the purpose of the communication. Communication content and delivery platform should confirm to achieve the purpose of communication.

Mode of Communication
Traditional one-way communication, or dissemination, has long been considered enough to reach objectives in development cooperation. It assumes that the receivers – the citizens – take the information and transform it into action. However, proof has shown that the dissemination method is neither sufficient nor efficient. To be credible communication must take into account the focus on participation and transparency. With participatory approaches, projects, programmes and sector support will belong to those they are set to benefit assuring real ownership.

Modern communication theories rely on building relations, in other words creating a dialogue between those previously seen as senders and receivers. However, exact mode of communication depends on the requirement and ground condition.

Caveat
There are several factors, which impact efficacy of communication. Credibility of content, sender and medium are important for the reception of communication by the intended recipients. Public trust is lost when they are imagined and approached in ways that ignores and devalues their everyday experiences. Distrust happens

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[4] Rick Davies (www.mande.co.uk).

[5]Theory of Incidental Effects says media has limited effects on its audience. According to this theory media effects are limited to copying of style, mannerism. etc., Reinforcement Theory stated that mass media has limited effects on its audience. It merely reinforces existing values and attitudes.

[6]Agenda Setting Theory says that media can and often do set agenda for the society to follow. Catharsis and Narcosis Theory has it that exposure to mass media particularly A/V media engrosses the audience attention to the extent that it prevents them from taking any logical decisions. According to Cultivation Theory media, especially A/V media tend to induce audiences to adopt perception and values which were constantly portrayed in different programmes.

[7]Barnett, Andrew (4 April 2005) 'Reducing poverty needs an 'innovation system' approach', SciDev.Net, available at www.scidev.net/dossiers/index.cfm?fuseaction=dossierReadItem&type=3&itemid=374&language=1&dossier=13.

when communication fails to address the world as the public recognize it, leaving them feeling like outsiders looking on at a drama that even the leading performers do not care if they really comprehend. Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism did an interesting constructivist study of social life of news. The study highlighted the need for public trust for news. The findings are relevant for communication by civil society too.

Free access to information is another important factor to accord credibility to the information, and ensure transparency which is a significant factor in the process of development. Freedom of speech and expression including freedom to disseminate information is also required. Fortunately we have that in India, enshrined in the constitution and jealously guarded by the judiciary and civil society. Market at times has its own agenda related to development. There could be a conflict here, in which case both civil society and market forces would like to use communication to influence the public. In cases like these, credibility of content and sender play a vital role in influencing the public.

Conclusion

The public sphere is the space of communication of ideas and projects that emerge from society and are addressed to the decision makers in the institutions of society. The civil society is the organized expression of the values and interests of society. The relationships between government and civil society and their interaction via the public sphere define the polity of society. Media plays a very important role in synergizing the large public sphere in the development process. However, much depends upon the credibility and usefulness of the content of communication for the public and the skill of using communication to an end.

[8]Public Trust in the News, Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, 2009

Further Resources:

Books:

Hovland Ingie, Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations, Research and Policy in Development Programme, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London, SE1 7JD, 2005

Civil Society Media and Global Governance - Intervening into the World Summit on the Information Society, by Arne Hintz, 2009

Communication Development and Civil Society : Essays on Social Development and Civil Society by V.S. Gupta, 2004

Globalization, communication and transnational civil society by Sandra Braman, Annabelle Sreberny in 1996

The politics of civil society: neoliberalism or social left? By Frederick W. Powell in 2007

Articles:

http://p2pfoundation.net/Engaging_Critically_with_the_Reality_and_Concept_of_Civil_Society

http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/155.pdf

http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/keyword/civil-society

http://iamcr.org/members-books-newsmenu-325/545-civil-society-media

http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/file:download,id=745/Chapter%202.pdf

http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/india/The-rise-of-civil-society/Article1-683329.aspx

http://www.hindustantimes.com/Search/search.aspx?q=Civil%20Society

Websites:

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/gcs.html?cx=002144977510494500317:_n5qeshhmvy&cof=FORID:10&ie=UTF-8&q=%22Civil+Society+Working+Paper%22&sa=Search

http://www.undp.org/oslocentre/overview/civil_society_communication.html

http://www.waccglobal.org/en/19963-alternative-communication-networks/963-Globalisation-Civil-Society-and-Communication.html

http://www.un.org/en/civilsociety/

http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/antidiscrimination_relations_with_civil_society/c10717_en.htm

http://www.civilsocietyonline.com/