PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION:
WITH EXAMPLES FROM THE WINDWARD ISLANDS

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SUMMARY

Communication, in the context of Agricultural Development, takes place through a system made up of various stages and various channels. Based on this concept the paper describes three issues that are crucial to the planning and implementation of development communication.

Examples of how these principles have been put into practice are taken from a project in the Windward Islands.

The conclusion is that effective Development Communication demands that considerable attention be given to analysis, planning and coordination, and that this depends as much on the skills of managerial staff as it does on the abilities of media producers and technicians.
I want to talk today about some of the principles of effective Development Communication. My objective is to create an awareness and understanding of certain key factors that affect the ability of agricultural development projects to inform, educate and motivate the rural community. I plan to describe three principles and illustrate these with examples from a project in the Caribbean. In the process we will take a look at some of the communication materials produced by this project.

Let me start by stating these three principles:

1. Development Communication is most effective when activities are planned to take place at all stages of the communication system in a coordinated manner.

2. Development Communication is most effective when, at each stage of the communication system, it involves the coordinated use of more than one media.

3. Development Communication is most effective when the media in use is designed for the benefit of precisely identified audience groups.

In order to explain the reasoning behind these principles it is necessary to introduce the idea of a 'communication system'. A number of authors have described extension as the link between researchers and farmers. This is a true but highly simplified definition. In reality there are a large number of links, these links form various chains from researchers to farmers, and the chains are inter-connected to form a system.

Some of the basic components of this system are illustrated in the attached diagram. This diagram is still a highly simplified version of what happens in practice, but it does allow us to develop a number of arguments.

Firstly, the system shows us that our communication with farmers has a number of levels or stages. Between researcher and farmer at least four categories of people are involved. If the link between any two of these groups is weak, the entire system could fail. Responsibility for Development Communication is therefore not limited to the media specialist, though they may play a key role; it is the responsibility of the entire organisation.

To illustrate this point I would like to show you some print materials from the Caribbean. These materials come from the Windward Islands, a small group of islands which get most of their income from banana production. They have both research and extension organisations which specialise in bananas. The researchers have identified a set of priority recommendations and these include advice on how to prevent latex from staining the bananas. Let us see what happens to this research recommendation:
Firstly a research bulletin is produced. This carries detailed technical information to senior officers of the extension project. This is followed by a training manual, which carries precise guidelines from the technical and training specialists to supervisory staff and trainers. Thirdly, an advisory leaflet carries a summary of these guidelines onto the next stage of the communication system which are the extension agents. The extension agent then passes this information onto the farmers. At the same time a newspaper article is produced by the media specialists, which carries the guidelines and some background information to progressive farmers, and a series of posters carry key messages to the whole farming community.

It is worth repeating that all of these materials are based on the same recommendations regarding how to prevent latex stains. All of the communication activities take place in a coordinated manner, with a predetermined schedule.

This process is apparently very simple. However, in many parts of the world it fails to take place, and one of the main reasons for this failure is that a large number of the participants of the system are inclined to leave the job of communications to media specialists. This leads me to re-state my first principle: Development Communication is most effective when activities are planned to take place at all stages of the communications system in a coordinated manner. Media specialists may play a key role in Development Communication, but it is the responsibility of all parties to ensure that these specialists produce materials which are relevant, effective and properly utilized.

We can compare our communication system to building a house. Our media specialist is like the bricklayer who puts in place many of the basic building blocks. However, we do not let him work on his own, he is a member of a team which includes the plumber, the carpenter and the electrician, as well as the surveyor, the architect and the landlord. I leave it to you to decide which of these you represent. Let me just say that we all have a role to play.

Returning to our diagram of the communication system, I would like to bring out a second line of argument. We have already said that the system has a number of levels and that a weak link, between any two of these levels can make the entire system fail. One important way of avoiding this problem is to make use of not just one link between levels, but two, three or more links. None of these groups of people should depend on one channel for their communication. Of course each of the different channels they use will play a slightly different role; they may be used at different times, in different locations, and to carry different parts of the overall message. But by using more than one channel we improve the communication potential of the system.

Let us briefly consider how this has been put into practice in the Winward Islands. This time we will consider another recommendation: the prevention of 'Moko' disease.

- Between the training specialist and the extension worker at least 3 different channels are being used:
  - a slide set which is used in the classroom to provide the foundation for lectures and discussion.
o an advisory bulletin which the extension worker can take away from
the classroom and keep in his office as a reference document.

o a leaflet which the extension worker can take to the field and use as a
guide for the recognition of the disease.

- Between the media specialists and the farmers there are again at
least 3 different channels being used:

- a series of radio spot announcements which create a general
awareness of the disease

- a series of posters which summaries the steps to be taken in order to
prevent the disease.

- a video film, for use with groups of farmers to explain disease
prevention in more detail.

Again, all of these communication activities take place in a coordinated
manner with a common aim and a predetermined schedule. What is being
illustrated this time is the use of different media to carry a single
recommendation at each particular level. This brings us to the second
principle: Development Communication is most effective when at each stage
of the communication system, it involves the coordinated use of more than one
media.

If we return to the comparison with building a house, we can refer to
different media as a set of tools. A good carpenter, does not just use a
hammer, he also uses a saw and a plane. Similarly we should use all the tools
available to us: meetings, the printed word, audio-visual materials and so
forth.

The third issue I want to draw out from the concept of the communication
system requires us to consider not just the individual level of the system but
the individual item of media used at a particular level. If we are all to be
involved in Development Communication, and we all use a variety of media, it
may demand a lot of resources. There is consequently a great need to make
sure that these resources are used as efficiently as possible. In order to do
this let us take another look at the diagram. We will see that the boxes
contain very broad categories of people. 'Farmers' for example would better
be represented by a collection of different boxes, the farmers in each of these
new boxes having different characteristics; one box might represent
subsistence tenant farmers, another may be literate progressive farmers and
another may be women farmers producing particular crops. This sub-division
of the farmers may seem to complicate our work, but in fact it provides a
basis for us to use our communication resources in the most effective manner.

To explain this further let us return, metaphorically, to the Windward
Islands. If we take another look at the three posters that aim to prevent latex
staining, we find that each is designed for a different group of farmers. In this
case the groups are characterised by their location.

- The first poster is the simplest, giving a single slogan and one
large illustration. This is for general use in villages where it aims to
catch attention and create awareness of the most important
message.

- The second poster is for use at meeting halls, government offices,
and other places where farmers will have time to take a close look at the detail and discuss the 5 different items that are shown.

- The third is for use at Field Packing Stations. It has an intermediate level of information, combining a certain amount of boldness in the design and a certain amount of detail in the text.

By selecting the priority groups of farmers and by designing each item of media to meet the needs of a specific group, the project is using its resources in a way that will result in maximum impact. This is our third principle: *Development Communications is most effective when the media in use is designed for the benefit of precisely identified audience groups.*

If we revisit the house which is being built, what I am advocating is the accurate use of our tools. We should only hammer and saw those pieces of timber which require it, and then only after giving due consideration to the grain of the wood.

In order to bring these three principles together, I would like to show another communications product of the Winward Islands. This time it is a video film which presents a number of important agronomic recommendations. The film is over 20 minutes long so we will not be watching all of it. We will, however, see enough to allow us to consider 3 issues:

- What groups of people were involved in the production process?
- How does it complement other channels of communication? and
- How accurately is it designed to suit the characteristics of particular audience groups?

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Let us now briefly consider our three principles in relation to this film.

* **Principle one:** The film is not just the product of media specialists. Before the film could be made, researchers had to carry out trials, the technical specialists had to draw up a package of recommendations, and the trainers had to design a programme of activities that would pass these recommendations through the system. The film was then designed to support certain of those activities.

* **Principle two:** Other media were used at the same time as the film. Print materials were developed to convey the same recommendations and, as the film indicated, field workers were also communicating this information to the farmers.

* **Principle three:** The audience was identified as progressive farmers having over 5 acres of bananas with export-oriented production. The planning of the film involved a detailed analysis of this audience to determine their knowledge, attitudes, practices and resources. Additionally, the film was tested on sample groups of these farmers before being given a larger audience.

What I hope to have shown by now is the Development Communications is not a matter of a few specialists producing isolated radio programmes, or pamphlets, or video films for the world at large. Development Communications is a matter of everybody in an organisation using all suitable media as
precisely as possible. Consequently, effective Development Communications demands that considerable attention be given to analysis, planning and coordination. And it is in these areas that we can make the best start to improving our capabilities to inform, educate and motivate the rural community.

The implication of these arguments is that effective Development Communication depends as much on the skills of managerial staff as it does on the skills of media producers and technicians.

The next question we need to ask ourselves is: how can these principles be put into practice? This will depend very much on the objectives, resources and organisation of each project, but certain guidelines can be given if we examine the issues of Analysis, Planning and Co-ordination:

Analysis. This can be put into practice through an 'Action Research' programme which would include
  • KAP studies of our audience (knowledge, Attitudes and Practices)
  • Pre-testing of all media at the draft stage
  • Monitoring of adoption levels and the use of communication channels.

Some projects have special sections that carry out action research, though in most cases satisfactory information can be collected through ad-hoc surveys jointly organised by existing monitoring and media units.

Planning. This can be put into practice through drawing up a 'Seasonal Communication Strategy' which would identify audience groups, subjects and media to fit every niche in the system. The Strategy would arise from pre-seasonal meetings between Chief Extension Officers, Chief Training Officers and the head of the media/communications unit.

Coordination. This can be put into practice through a 'Seasonal Work Programme' based on the Communication Strategy, followed by monthly 'Progress Statements'. Drawn up by the head of the media/communications unit, the work programme would include the following activities for every proposed item (or series of items) of media: provision of technical information, production of drafts, pretesting, approval, final production, distribution and/or use. For each activity the programme would give dates and responsibilities, and the entire Programme would require the approval of the Project Manager. The Progress Statements would also be issued by the head of media/communications, and meetings of appropriate staff would be called if progress did not match the Programme.

Activities such as these would not make great demands on project staff, but they would go a long way in helping to ensure that our three principles are implemented. As a result our Development Communication efforts would be far more effective and we will be a large step closer to achieving project objectives.
Simplified communication system

Policy Makers

Project Managers

Researchers

Technical Specialists

Training Specialists

Media Specialists

Supervising Staff

Extension Agents

Contact Farmers

Farmers