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A NETWORK FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

by Guy Bessette

Why do farmers continue cultivating the same crops using traditional methods when they have access to other varieties that are more productive and less susceptible to disease? Why does AIDS keep spreading despite the dissemination of information and massive distribution of condoms? Why does illiteracy remain widespread despite literacy efforts? There is a common element in all three cases: despite generous intentions, no one managed to involve the local people in these initiatives that were nevertheless conceived in their interest.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are particularly well qualified to help solve the problems of communities from which they generally spring. This is why they play an essential role in development. Furthermore, for those seeking to involve groups in development activities, communication is an essential aspect of their job.

In the words of Marie-Bernadette Kabré, a Burkinese consultant for IDRC's Development Communication Program, "We have to promote the type of development that requires its beneficiaries to assume responsibility for it. This is where communication comes in, because it makes participation possible."

With this purpose in mind, IDRC set up a program in West Africa focusing on communication as a development tool within communities. The program is designed for NGOs in nine countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal.

As a first step, IDRC invited a hundred or so NGOs to take part in developing this program. Then, during field trips, some 70 organizations were visited. As a result of these meetings, communication priorities in this part of Africa were placed in relief. Once the outlines of the program were clearly identified, a regional meeting of NGOs was held in November 1994, at the Pan- African Institute for Development, in Burkina Faso. The objective of the new program was firmly established at this meeting: support the communication efforts of NGOs that seek to help local communities participate in their own development. Emphasis was placed on training, with the focus on women and girls as the target clientele.

The NGOs defined five basic elements -- outlined below -- for improving communication to promote better development in their area.

TRAINING

NGOs acknowledge the need to establish a dialogue with the communities they work with, if they hope to secure their participation. To do so, their members must learn to discover new approaches adapted to different contexts. Alioune Danfa, Coordinator of ADEF-Afrique, an NGO in Senegal, states, "We have to create training procedures for a new type of leader who no longer assumes the status of 'expert in charge of transmitting knowledge,' but rather one who facilitates the process of acquiring knowledge, skills and

attitudes crucial to endogenous, integrated community development."

BASIC EDUCATION

Many NGO personnel identified education as a priority area for action in Africa. They also stressed that traditional ways are inadequate for meeting needs. From now on, to be functional, suitable and cost-effective, every education and training program, every development project, must draw on the productive and creative energy of the community.

CONDITIONS FAVOURING SUCCESS

Many NGOs already work successfully on development projects in close cooperation with local people. "There are some very successful experiences," says Marie-Bernadette Kabré. "But information about them is underdisseminated and underutilized." It is important to increase awareness of these positive experiences so as to reinforce them on the one hand and, on the other, to identify the best conditions for success so as to work better with the people.

TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION

The need to be familiar with traditional communication channels and strategies, and to use them, has been put forward as a means of fostering participation by the people. It has also been suggested that local knowledge should be researched and encouraged so as to create a bridge with modern knowledge and enhance respect for people who store traditional lore.

INCREASING RECOGNITION OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN

For Awa Adjibade, a sociologist with the Pan-African Institute for Development, West Africa and Sahel, "Women, the pillars of the traditional African family, have always played a major role in the development process. However, they are often excluded from the communication process."

African women represent potential knowledge and know-how that we must hasten to use. "With regard to communication," points out Afaoué Sangaré, President of the Ivory Coast section of the Association of African Women for the Prevention of AIDS, "African women have traditional knowledge, which they disseminate through local channels; they are the keepers of traditions. Any communication of a participatory nature brings this knowledge up to date and puts it to better use."

TOWARD AN NGO NETWORK

The program, which should get under way in early 1996, is aimed at creating a network in participatory development communication. The advantages of this network are as follows: enable NGOs to undertake various research activities related to the program, bring their activities to the attention of the communities and, through contact with one another, learn better ways of helping the communities to take part in their own development.

FOR A BETTER FUTURE

One of the conditions for ensuring lasting development consists of supporting people and communities so that they can take an active part in their own development. To do so, according to André-Eugène Ilboudo, Coordinator of the Vive le Paysan Association in Burkina Faso, "We shouldn't begin by trying to bring things to people, but rather by helping them to bring forth what they themselves have and what they don't manage to give shape to."

Guy Bessette is Senior Program Officer, Development Communication, IDRC. E-mail: gbessette@idrc.ca

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