

In August 1979, Commonwealth heads of governments endorsed the establishment of a committee to study communication and media problems with particular reference to the needs of developing countries, as a basis for identifying communication priorities and suitable forms of cooperation.

The report of the Commonwealth Committee on Communication and the Media, Communication, society and development, was recently published by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Marlborough House, Pall Mall, London SW1Y 5HX, England). It will be on the agenda at the next Commonwealth meeting in August 1981. A summary of its main points and recommendations follows.

COMMUNICATION, SOCIETY, AND DEVELOPMENT

Communication is so much a part of our lives that its significance as an aspect of human effort and progress is often either taken for granted or simply ignored. Thus, communication and the media have only recently become a focus of attention at regional and international fora, after several other policy issues. Ironically, although communication-related matters become the subject of concerned discussion somewhat late in the day, it is left to communicators to disseminate the results of earlier enquiries on other issues.

This is indeed the true role of communicators: to serve as a focal point of messages imparting information and ideas, and to ensure that an interchange

takes place. Communication is a dynamic process that is more effective if it is participatory. It thus provides people with an opportunity to be directly associated with policy formulation and implementation, giving them a sense of commitment to national issues.

How many mistakes in social and economic development could have been avoided with better communication between planners and the people? The richness of people's experience, the value of established wisdom, the virtue of common sense — all this and more must go into the national meld if development plans and projects are to inspire and excite. None of this may occur, unless effective communication facilitates it.

Yet, there is a certain reluctance on the part of policymakers to concede that communication is a critical factor in development, or if they concede the point, a reluctance to follow through with action. Nor are systems devised and consistently used whereby the attitudes, reservations, and proposed changes of the people concerned are elicited and respected.

In the task of nation-building, therefore, many governments have as a primary requirement the need to draw such groups into the national communication system in order to enable them to participate actively in society, to identify with other groups and with the nation as a whole. The communication process must be broadened, strengthened, and diversified so that it is part of the structure of society and truly reflects its concerns. Then, communicators, serving as professional interlocutors and using whatever mode or level of technology is suited to their needs, can provide the necessary link between the centre and the periphery of society.

In most developing countries of the Commonwealth, there is a need for comprehensive communication policies as part of overall national planning. The need is strongest where the existing communication systems are inadequate and resources scarce. It is of particular importance in countries which have as a primary goal the task of

drawing several societies into one nation and generating a sense of national identity and consciousness.

MASS MEDIA

The mass media present developing countries with great opportunities and great challenges. Society can benefit from the potentially extensive reach of the media, not only in the process of development, but also in various other aspects of life, from farm news to weather reports to entertainment. But the media, like any other institution, do not develop or exist in a vacuum.

A part of society, they must reflect that society and be responsive to its needs and goals if they are to be relevant and durable.

By definition, the print media reach only the literate groups who tend to be largely urban elites. The literacy problem is compounded in many Commonwealth countries by the existence of several language groups. Despite these difficulties, the print media have an important role in promoting literacy. This can be advanced if they are adapted to the needs of the bulk of readers and adopt a format and style designed to promote reading interests.

Available data suggest that newspaper circulation relative to population has tended to decline slightly since 1970. In more than a few countries, this may be due to the growth of radio. It may also be affected by other economic factors like

price rises, or reflect that some readers find the newspapers unsuited to their taste.

Radio on the other hand, has been described as *the* medium of the people, reaching as it does across the barrier of literacy and limited in its potential penetration only by the availability of transmission equipment and radio receivers. It presents a general pattern of expansion. Nevertheless, despite the reduction in the cost of receivers, the spread of radio ownership remains small in several countries. Governments, in granting licenses for local production, should therefore give due consideration to the need to make radio sets available at prices that enable the widest possible diffusion of ownership.

The appeal of television is a reality and more and more countries are drawn to it. The potential value of television as a medium for education, for promoting development, as well as for information and entertainment is undeniable — but so are its higher cost and the uncertainties about its social and cultural impact. In this context, and with the potential for radio far from exhausted in most countries, the allocation of resources between radio and television bears careful consideration.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Public information services are an important element of communication in many developing countries. Yet despite their range of duties — from

producing brochures to interpreting complex policies — public information officers are sometimes denied access to the totality of relevant information. There is often a failure to appreciate the importance of their role.

The overriding necessity is perhaps for governments to realize that if public information services are to be effective, they must not be considered merely as propaganda tools. Senior officials should be consulted at early stages of proposed policy changes, and their views sought on probable public reaction.

In most countries, the major international news agencies have dominated air time and column space for many years. The nature of these organizations deters them from covering many areas of news that are considered fundamental in developing countries. Many observers have noted that this situation often produces news coverage that neither reflects actualities, aspirations, or achievements in developing countries.

Without losing access to information provided by the major agencies, but with a view to covering neglected areas of news and giving such coverage a home-grown orientation, there has been a growing trend for the establishment of national news agencies or transnational news pools. Several constraints impede their establishment, however, including the cost of equipment and of telecommunications and a lack of specialist staff.

The shortage of appropriately qualified people is a pressing problem in communication development in most countries of the Commonwealth. Needed are programs for the enhancement of skills, more effective media application in the fields of health, agriculture, education, etc., the creation and sharing of training technology, and assistance in the development and management of training programs and institutions. These call for expanded, consistent, and concerted efforts in allocating appropriate resources, as a matter of public policy.

ACTION

In the belief that Commonwealth governments and peoples can benefit by recognizing the part that communication and media can play in assisting society by strengthening participatory democracy and helping to attain national goals, the Committee recommends that the professional status of communicators and their roles and responsibilities should be recognized and respected. Communication policy should receive attention as an integral part of national planning. Developing countries should accordingly give appropriate priority to the needs of the communication sector in their requests for external assistance and aid donors show a readiness to assist.

Further, the media should take the initiative in establishing links between

organizations in developed and developing countries. Staff in public information services should be aided to improve their expertise through opportunities for exchanging ideas and experiences.

The development of national news agencies should be promoted and governments should aid the flow of information between countries by adopting and extending concessionary telecommunications tariffs to the utmost extent possible.

The Committee also recommends that specific projects in the various areas of communication training, professional development, and the establishment of links between Commonwealth countries should be formulated by media organizations and governments. The Commonwealth Secretariat has a role to play in facilitating the exchange of information and materials.

Thus, the growing information needs of Commonwealth countries could be met and their capacity enlarged for freer, cheaper, better balanced, and more effective communication. □

The Commonwealth Committee on Communication and the Media was chaired by Ernest Corea, former Sri Lanka High Commissioner to Canada and presently Director, Cooperative Programs, IDRC.

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