

Strategic communication for social development: lessons for communication practice in community development projects

Bhupesh Joshi

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how strategic communication (SC) can complement the efforts of organisations and individuals involved in development projects in community settings.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper recognises the current debates in SC, communication for development and social change (CDSC), and public relations that emphasise a deeper investigation of communication processes underpinning organisational and citizen activities driving social change. It concedes that meaning-making, collective action and co-creation foreground current conceptualisations and propositions in these three fields. Hence, the communication practices underpinning four distinct development projects are deeply examined in relation to relevant theoretical concepts and ideas to draw conclusions on how strategic communication can enhance community development outcomes in this work.

Findings – The findings generated through the qualitative interviews of 20 development and communication professionals associated with four development projects in India are used to discuss the priorities and processes driving communication around development projects. These findings are also discussed in relation to five strategic communication functions: goal-setting, message, media/channel, internal and external stakeholders, and evaluation to establish the implications of this work for development practice.

Originality/value – This unique study illuminates the complexity of communication around development projects in developing countries and how strategic communication theories can inform communication practices in those contexts.

Keywords Strategy, Public relations, Community relations, Strategic communication, Communication strategy, Non-profit sector, Communication management, Communication planning

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Strategic communication (SC) as a field of practice remains imperative for development practitioners around the world. At the same time, SC remains an under-researched area in development and social change, influencing how SC is understood and used in development practice (Waisbord, 2014). On the one hand, communication for development and social change (CDSC) scholars frequently consider the complexity of communication and the critical aspects of varying contexts, public participation and power differences underpinning social change in societies (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006; Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2020; Waisbord, 2015; Wilkins *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, SC has remained confined to organisational-level planning, aiming for individual-level changes (Obregón and Tufte, 2017) that do not reflect the richness of SC scholarship.

The scholarly field of SC, however, has witnessed considerable advances in the last 2 decades. SC has been examined in relation to society (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Heath *et al.*, 2018), the public sphere (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014), movements (Ciszek, 2017) and

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marginalised groups (Soriano, 2014). These theoretical developments reflect advances in the broader stream of humanities and social sciences and their impact on various communication disciplines, including public relations. Given these advances, communication practice in development and social change must be reviewed frequently to draw lessons on SC's comprehensive use in development practice.

This work concedes that SC (and the related field of public relations) and CDSC recognise the discursive and dynamic nature of communication, wherein communication is no longer viewed as a linear process driven by the organisation to achieve social change. The complexity of communication processes and their implications for diverse stakeholders are frequently considered when imagining better communication plans and programs in scholarship. A greater focus on meaning-making, collective action and co-creation among societal actors is evident in communication for social change and development and SC (see, for example, Botan, 2017; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Obregón and Tufte, 2017; Servaes, 2020). Furthermore, sociopolitical aspects of community empowerment, agency and voice, social justice and communication rights receive greater attention in CDSC (Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2020; Thomas, 2011; Waisbord, 2020). Hence, this paper explores how the above theoretical advances can inform the communication practices of development institutions.

Broadly, this paper begins with a brief review of the literature outlining relevant theoretical debates in CDSC and SC. Then, it details the background and the outcomes of the primary research investigating four development projects in India. The research findings from the qualitative interviews with 20 development and communication practitioners are presented to elucidate the prevalent communication practices in India. Finally, key insights for SC are drawn highlighting five areas that require attention when engaging in SC in development projects.

Literature review: strategic communication and communication for development and social change

SC is predominantly understood as the purposeful use of communication by organisations, groups or movements to achieve their mission or goals (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014). When viewed in relation to CDSC, SC planning has been integral to development interventions for many decades. Whether it is smallpox eradication or polio campaigns in developing countries, the campaigns have involved detailed communication planning and implementation, entailing partnerships between multiple donors, governments, agencies and communities.

Nevertheless, SC in development practice has also been critiqued for not reflecting the dynamic nature of development or social change and instead, aiming for informational objectives around individual-level changes (Obregón and Tufte, 2017). Participatory communication approaches, in particular, present a critical perspective of development and social change, investigating the role of multiple actors and unearthing aspects of power imbalances and marginalisation in communication and social change (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006; Waisbord, 2014; Wilkins *et al.*, 2014). For participatory communication scholars, the problematisation of social change or communication happens at individual, structural and societal levels (Waisbord, 2014). For example, when viewed through a participatory lens, the problem of homelessness is not only an issue of better intake of social services but also reflects the systemic factors contributing to homelessness. Hence, CDSC must be viewed comprehensively, recognising the sociocultural and sociopolitical factors surrounding development interventions.

Consequently, the focus of communication shifts from individual-level changes to collective action among participating actors in communication and social change, highlighting the sociopolitical nature of development (Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2020). In this regard, it is worth noting that development communication has been referred to as “a process of strategic intervention toward social change initiated by institutions and communities”

(Wilkins and Mody, 2001, p. 385). Furthermore, SC in social movements is understood from the perspective of development institutions (top-down) or communities (bottom-up); however, a recognition of context and the complexity of communication is important here (Obregón and Tufte, 2017). Against this background, this work concedes that a deeper understanding of the theoretical field of SC is equally important to establish SC's relevance for social change.

Current debates in strategic communication and development and social change

The theoretical field of SC has progressed significantly in the past 2 decades since the publication of the first comprehensive article on SC (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Various definitions of SC emphasise its goal-driven and persuasive nature and relevance for a communication agent who could be representing a government, a corporation, a not-for-profit organisation or a social movement in society (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014).

Nevertheless, when examining SC, considering how the concept of strategy that has its roots in military practice can be transported to the field of human development and social change is critical. The questions one must earnestly answer are to what end strategy is directed and how it is executed in societal contexts. Notably, how a goal-directed strategy unfolds in relation to a social entity's publics/stakeholders has been in the continuous spotlight in SC scholarship (see, for example, Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Heath *et al.*, 2018; King, 2009).

Currently, a recognition exists that strategy is initiated by a social entity to achieve a goal; however, strategy remains a dynamic process emerging through several deliberations among both internal and external stakeholders of that entity over long periods (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; King, 2009). Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2014) recognise the existence of both functionalist and emergent strategic processes in organisations and the need for organisational leaders to ensure emergence in strategy. Likewise, Botan (2017) identifies the difference between "somewhat" and "highly" cocreational approaches to SC in which highly cocreational signifies the "right of publics to free and fully informed decision-making" (p. 43).

Furthermore, the meaning of communication has moved beyond a one-way transmission model comprising the elements of sender, receiver, coding and decoding (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Consequently, a strategic communicator is no longer limited to being the sender of information (through a media/channel), and stakeholders are not simply the receiver of information. The contemporary understanding of communication (the idea of constitutive communication, for instance) recognises dynamic engagements between the actors involved in SC (Heath *et al.*, 2018; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014). Here, communication is viewed as a meaning-making process that can entail consensus, co-creation or dissensus among the parties involved (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007).

In summary, both strategy and communication remain dynamic processes entailing continuous engagement among key stakeholders of a social entity. Communities or stakeholders of SC plans and programs are no longer latent recipients of strategy or communication; in fact, they shape both strategy and communication and contribute to the meaning-making process and strategy development. Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2014) observe that a strategic communicator sending information through the most effective channel only acts as "the point of departure for meaning creation between a communicative entity and its stakeholders", whereas examining the process of communication among stakeholders and how media is interpreted and reproduced by them is central to SC (p. 8).

In the above context, it is important to recognise that SC has received attention in CDSC scholarship, albeit infrequently. For example, Waisbord (2014) argues that SC in development and social change must be rooted in the process of "institutions" and "organised citizens" joining hands and achieving social change collectively (p. 149). For Waisbord (2014), "strategic collective action" is critical for social change and must be considered in terms of "how mobilised citizens plan and execute actions based on collective analysis and solutions" (p. 164). On a similar note, Obregón and Tufte (2017) concede that social movement

communication go beyond individual-level processes of change dominant in SC in development. According to these authors, movements can spring from both institutional and bottom-up community initiatives in society; therefore, more emphasis should be placed on “understanding the role of communication in processes of sense-making and collective action” (p. 639). Investigating how networks are formed and mobilised in complex social change settings for worthy social causes is key here.

In summary, even though SC remains goal-directed and inherently persuasive, understanding how a goal takes shape through the communication practices of individuals, organisations or social movements within a complex social reality is important. Here, social entities can be diverse, but their interconnectedness with other actors or stakeholders cannot be ignored. Further, an examination of the two aspects of the process of communication and how the media content is interpreted and recreated by stakeholders in the meaning-making process is critical. In terms of social change, the existence of both bottom-up and institution-led communication initiatives cannot be denied. SC remains contextual and situational in development practice, and locating its origin and of the communication agent is critical. Based on the context and situation, one can understand how the goal is/can be defined; what kind of communication processes exist between internal and external stakeholders; how media and messages are created and interpreted; and how human development can be achieved through collective action.

Background of the study

Comprehensive research was conducted to examine how communication plans and programs around development projects take shape in India. Theories in CDSC and public relations were reviewed extensively to understand how these might inform the communication practices of development institutions in developing countries.

In the context of India, CDSC has been understood from the perspective of empowerment and social justice for marginalised communities (Melkote and Steeves, 2015); social movements and communication rights of communities (Thomas, 2011); and Indigenous voices and culture-centred approaches of the communities at the margins (Dutta, 2022). Furthermore, scholars from Southeast Asia emphasise culture, listening and engagement as critical aspects of SC and public relations in community development (Sison, 2017; Sison and Sarabia-Panol, 2018). Some scholars propose integrating community views through deliberative techniques in public relations in the context of development projects in Southeast Asia (Yudarwati and Gregory, 2022). Therefore, the nature of community participation and empowerment and regard for local culture in communication in development projects were critical for this work.

At the same time, given the focus of this study, i.e. communication in the projects initiated by development institutions, a broader perspective of CDSC and public relations was adopted. It was recognised that both institution and community-led public relations and CDSC are discussed frequently in scholarship, notwithstanding a need to overcome organisation-centricity and theorise from the perspective of communities in development (Edwards, 2018; Hodges and McGrath, 2011; Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2020). The nuances of dialogue and co-creation between organisations and their publics in public relations and community development are investigated frequently (Botan and Taylor, 2004; Dutta and Elers, 2020; Paquette *et al.*, 2015). In this regard, people-driven and owned communication and social change are a prerequisite to achieving lasting and sustainable development (Dagron, 2009; Servaes *et al.*, 2012). And recognition of pre-existing communication forms and local culture is paramount in CDSC (Servaes, 2020; Waisbord, 2015).

Furthermore, CDSC is understood in terms of both behaviour change and participatory communication, given the co-existence of modernist and participatory traditions in scholarship (Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2020; Waisbord, 2020). While behaviour change approaches align with modernist perspectives aiming for individual-level changes, participatory

approaches focus more on the political empowerment of communities, aspects of power in communication, and bottom-up development. Crucially, given the multiplicity of approaches, the communication processes underpinning social change and development are receiving scholarly attention against the backdrop of the concepts of social justice, empowerment and collective action (Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2020; Waisbord, 2020).

Hence, this research recognised that both CDSC and public relations must be viewed in terms of collective action among institutions and individuals involved in developmental activities, while being wary of the sociopolitical nature of development and social change. Approaches that regard communication as a cyclical process among development/societal actors and foreground sociocultural and sociopolitical factors in CDSC and public relations provided a theoretical grounding to examine the complexity of communication in projects (see, for example, Edwards, 2018; Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006; Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2020). Consequently, the implementing organisations were viewed as the facilitators of the projects, and communication activities were examined as a cyclical process among the participating actors in primary research. From the perspective of SC, this approach to research aligned with the theories foregrounding collective action in SC in social change (Heath *et al.*, 2018; Waisbord, 2014).

Primary research

To generate deeper insights into communication in development, four development projects managed by four distinct institutions were selected, and development and communication planners and workers associated with these projects were interviewed. The first two projects (described below) focus on marginalised communities' rights and communal action, achieved through community-owned networks based on participatory development approaches. The remaining two projects focus on gender training for adolescents and enhanced public health screening in rural areas in India and lean towards behaviour change outcomes.

Projects

(1) Sanitation project engaging citizens in development planning

Goal: Heightened participation of the urban poor in development planning.

This project employs various participatory techniques to encourage the urban poor to identify and articulate their concerns regarding sanitation services. The project works towards delivering sustainable sanitation services in Indian cities, wherein the urban poor's rights and entitlements drive sanitation services. Communication activities happen at the grassroots and regional levels as events, workshops, media collaborations, community campaigns, stakeholder meetings and so on in this project.

(2) Water conservation by women's self-help groups (SHGs) in rural India

Goal: Enhancing leadership among rural women in Rajasthan, India.

This project aims for economic empowerment and social cohesion for women. In this project, women's self-help groups (SHGs), local village women and elected women representatives receive and use technical skills in water conservation and maintenance of water bodies to drive the program. A range of communication activities such as grassroots events and national and regional workshops happen to achieve social mobilisation in this project.

(3) Gender sensitivity program in schools

Goal: Impact gender attitudes and norms around the roles and responsibilities of women and men learnt at a young age.

This project targets adolescent boys to change their negative attitudes towards women and girls early in their lives. Using a variety of communication tools and activities, this project enhances the active participation of young adolescents, schoolteachers, parents and the larger local community around issues of gender and violence to support and promote equitable gender norms.

(4) Mobile-based public health intervention to address non-communicable diseases

Goal: Improve the quality of primary healthcare around undiagnosed non-communicable diseases through a mobile-based health intervention.

This project aims to manage non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and heart ailments effectively through early diagnosis. Implementing the project requires significant behaviour change among local communities for them to opt for technology-enabled screenings. The project offers opportunities to examine communication in relation to community awareness, engagement and behavioural change.

The above projects offer opportunities to examine the role of communication in diverse development contexts. Even though the projects can be understood in terms of distinct goals of development through community-owned networks and behaviour change, all four projects witness collective action among community members, development workers and other relevant stakeholders to achieve developmental goals. Regular advocacy, awareness generation and workshops with stakeholders in the government, media and local opinion leaders are key features of these projects.

Methodology

To capture diverse communication perspectives, every program coordinator and communication worker associated with the projects was interviewed in this study. Further, Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) was adopted to outline theoretical categories on communication practice around development projects. A total of 20 program and communication officials in head offices, and the fieldworkers stationed in regional or rural areas met the appropriate sample size criterion for grounded theory (Marshall *et al.*, 2013).

Grounded theory recommends various data collection methods including ethnography, intensive document analysis and interviewing. This study exclusively relied on in-depth purposive qualitative interviews with project team members for data collection. In purposive sampling, a qualitative researcher “purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites” to deeply investigate the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). From this perspective, the four community development projects on gender, public health and participatory development in India provided relevant sites for this investigation. Essentially, program and communication personnel at decision-making and operation levels met the “inclusion criteria” for qualitative interviews (Robinson, 2014, p. 26). The research participants belonged to the following four categories: (1) leadership/directors, (2) communication managers, (3) program managers in head offices and (4) field workers and managers stationed in regional areas and the grassroots.

Further, to source the research participants ethically and responsibly (Robinson, 2014), three critical steps were taken in the participant selection process: (1) approval of organisational heads to meet ethics guidelines, (2) identification of participants without any coercion and (3) participants’ consent and privacy/safety. Subsequently, a detailed interview guide was created following the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Accordingly, the interviews started with open-ended questions, moved to what and how questions, and explored theoretical plausibility throughout. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour and was conducted online on Zoom over 45 days in 2020. The interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed for a subsequent systematic analysis.

Furthermore, Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) approach to coding entailing open, axial and selective coding guided data analysis. In the first step, i.e. open coding, the recurring concepts

and ideas relevant to the study were identified. The open-coding process enabled the categorisation of the data into the following areas: participants' individual and social contexts; the meaning of development project success; the role of communication in projects; the underlying processes driving development and communication initiatives; and the meaning of public relations and development communication in projects.

Axial coding enabled the development of categories in relation to the studied phenomenon, i.e. communication practice in development. In axial coding, the researcher analyses the features of data/codes to establish "relationships among concepts" along with "coding for process" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 167). During this stage, the codes on process – communication staff involvement in community communication, program and communication teams' coordination, and communication for multiple functions through value overhaul – were categorised as two distinct categories emphasising program and communication teams' coordination and the centrality of communication in development projects. The codes representing contextual issues such as human dignity and communication rights were combined to create a category titled communication to promote human dignity and rights. The codes on the role of communication indicating community participation and action, community agency and ownership, stakeholder engagement, promotion and advocacy were also consolidated as relevant categories. Eventually, based on this analysis, eight categories were outlined (described in the following section). These eight categories were also analysed in relation to the codes on public relations and development communication to incorporate the concepts and ideas surrounding a core category and the "filling in of categories" in selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 236).

Limitation

This paper recognises certain limitations of this research. First, the findings generated through this study cannot strictly apply to community development projects in other countries where the government structures, including public–private partnerships and the role of NGOs and power relations among participating actors, can differ. Second, while online data collection enabled a certain level of detachment in primary research and interviews, it prevented in-person verification of responses and observation of body language or emotional cues in qualitative interviews.

Findings and discussion

The eight distinct communication categories offered as research findings included: 1. Communication as a central element of development; 2. Communication to promote human dignity and rights; 3. Communication driven by effective program and communication teams' coordination; 4. Communication for community engagement and greater uptake of programs; 5. Communication for community ownership and sustainability; 6. Communication for stakeholder engagement; 7. Communication for advocacy; and 8. Communication as marketing and fundraising. These categories captured the key communication priorities of development and communication workers involved in project-related communication activities. Although the meaning of these communication priorities was influenced by the nature and distinctiveness of each project, several commonalities were observed in research participants' responses to interview questions, pointing to the need for definitive communication categories in projects.

Mainly, the first three categories, emerging from an investigation of the underlying processes in communication, highlight what participants felt ought to happen to broaden the understanding and usage of communication around projects. In this regard, research participants proposed: overhauling organisational value systems to approach communication comprehensively; situating communication in human dignity and rights; and achieving seamless harmonisation among program teams, communication officials, and community members to enhance communication practices around projects.

The remaining five categories highlight the other key communication functions underscoring communication practice around projects according to research participants: stakeholder engagement, community engagement, community ownership, advocacy, and marketing and fundraising. Stakeholder engagement with government (local/regional/national), partner NGOs and funding bodies, grassroots government functionaries, local opinion leaders, and media underlined communication in the projects. Community engagement and community ownership emerged as critical communication priorities entailing awareness-building, localisation of messages, local event planning and community-owned events. In addition, advocacy with policymakers and media persons runs parallel to program activities. Finally, marketing and fundraising are fundamental to sustaining the projects and manifest as media promotion during regional and national events. Marketing and fundraising can dominate communication in institutional settings because communication staff are hired to meet this requirement.

Implications for strategic communication in development projects

When one examines communication in relation to communication processes around projects, one learns that communication is critical for addressing multiple priorities of development workers across community mobilisation, community ownership, stakeholder engagement, advocacy and project promotion. In terms of SC, the indicated role of communication in the eight categories reflects the perspectives of development and communication practitioners around project goals, and therefore, can be termed deliberate (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014). However, research participants frequently stressed heightened coordination between communication staff and program teams and greater community engagement and ownership in communication in projects to enhance communication effectiveness. Essentially, the planning and delivery of strategy or communication demand continuous negotiations between internal (project personnel stationed from national to local levels) and external stakeholders in the community in these contexts.

In this regard, the participatory development and grassroots women's empowerment programs that are predicated on being driven by community networks saw development workers play the role of facilitators or silent partners in communication activities from the outset (Hodges and McGrath, 2011). In these projects, the role of experts remains important, given the complexity of participatory planning or women's rights. However, development experts/workers are often guided by community networks instead of the preconceived designs of projects.

On the other hand, the projects revolving around behaviour change focus more on awareness generation and dialogue around the perils of inequitable gender norms or delayed health screenings. Program experts drive the projects, dissecting the technicalities of gender or health to achieve altered behaviours in communities here. Regardless, community participation and action are critical in the behaviour change projects too. For example, in the case of the gender program, program experts, schoolteachers, parents, and communities work collaboratively to unpack gender and contextualise the problem. Similarly, the health screening initiative demands greater participation of rural healthcare workers and patients with comorbidities to achieve program goals.

Broadly, communication plans and programs can exhibit the co-existence of both top-down and bottom-up approaches in a wide range of projects implemented by mid-sized development organisations. The assimilation of local contexts and community-owned development and social change are methodological choices that must be considered by development organisations (Waisbord, 2020). However, these can manifest distinctively based on the organisation/group's values and mission and the resulting approaches to social change and development in practice.

Furthermore, communication officers and managers interviewed in this study admitted that project-related communication is critical but can be far removed from the priorities of the communication planners stationed within development institutions. A prevalent notion among

development practitioners that communication is suitable for organisational promotion and fundraising (Dagron, 2009; Waisbord, 2015) can limit the applicability of SC in practice. Hence, problematising SC more broadly and mitigating the challenges impeding communication practice around projects remains critical. In this regard, research participants (two program managers and a communication manager) highlighted a need for revisiting organisational values and mission, integrating communication thinking and making communication a central element of development.

Importantly, the findings of this study can also inform some critical aspects of SC, examined by scholars and practitioners. Notably, goal-setting, messaging, channel choice and evaluation have been considered integral to SC (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Holtzhausen and Zeffass, 2014). And goals and tactics have also been discussed in CDSC scholarship (Waisbord, 2014). Hence, in the following section, the five elements that can underline SC planning have been examined in relation to research findings.

(1) Goal-setting

SC is often understood by scholars and practitioners in terms of its goal-directedness. In the context of development projects, strategy and communication can be administered by implementing organisation. Here recognising that social change that is initiated by development institutions can be termed as top-down is critical (Obregón and Tufte, 2017). However, SC cannot remain controlling and must reflect how it emerges through deliberations about the designed interventions over many months (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Goal-setting in SC around development projects must reflect varying contexts – the ground reality and the challenges facing communities and other stakeholders – to achieve community development collectively (Waisbord, 2014). The role of development workers, funding agencies, local partners and community groups is important in strategy and communication, as discovered in this research.

Research participants' responses indicate that the aspect of emergence in strategy and communication is greatly shaped by the nature of projects emanating from an organisation/group's mission. For example, in the participatory development and grassroots women's empowerment projects, participants' responses around the importance of and approaches to stakeholder engagement at the grassroots, regional and national levels revealed that community networks drove stakeholder dialogues. Advocacy and promotion in these projects were also guided by the goals of community networks. A research participant (program director) observed that their advocacy and promotion are grounded in the belief that "women are represented in policymaking and social action from grassroots to national levels", shaping every aspect of their communication.

In terms of meaning-making, recognising the sociopolitical nature of SC and the centrality of voice in community development is critical in this context (Waisbord, 2015). A participant (program manager) stressed the importance of understanding their participatory development project in terms of "rights of the people" and the need for development and communication practitioners to be "prepared and able to fight for their (marginalised communities) rights". Likewise, two grassroots workers from the women's rights project stressed the importance of understanding local dialects and cultural contexts and the need to allow the projects to be driven by these rather than the predefined meanings of rights. In the context of tribal communities in Rajasthan, for example, development workers stressed understanding the technicalities of women's empowerment from a tribal perspective. Songs and drama, the community's close association with their land, and community ownership were vital to communication around gender here. Essentially, new information on research methodologies around the political empowerment of women and participatory planning acted as a point of departure (Holtzhausen and Zeffass, 2014), but how this was reinterpreted by community networks was key. The centrality of community voice in these projects aligns with scholarly positions emphasising voice, listening and local culture as fundamental to grassroots democracy and decolonising development (Dutta, 2022; Manyozo, 2017).

On the other hand, when behaviour change such as altered gender norms or greater health screening among rural communities was the main goal, research-based approaches acted as a starting point in the projects. A research-based approach to development witnessed a greater involvement of development and communication experts in the creation of learning materials, curriculum and technological interventions. In this regard, SC planners must recognise the depth of existing knowledge. At the same time, they must understand that formative research and pre-intervention community workshops were critical to achieving goal clarity in the behavioural change projects. In other words, strategy becomes meaningless unless it serves people in development (Waisbord, 2014), and goal-setting must reflect the emergent nature of strategy and communication (King, 2009), regardless of the nature of projects.

(2) Message strategy

Another aspect of SC frequently considered in scholarship and practice is messaging. In this research, the message strategy was found to be governed by the development approaches of development organisations. For example, the initial messages in the project focusing on grassroots women's rights stem from the need for more women in decision-making and equitable resource allocation (the governing philosophy of the implementing organisation). However, these messages are also localised through deliberations, exposing how women's rights and water scarcity and the management of water bodies are intertwined in the desert state of Rajasthan. According to one program participant and two grassroots research participants, an understanding of human rights and the dignity of local communities must precede communication planning. A participant (grassroots worker) emphasised a need to understand that "these issues are linked to their (local community) way of life and impact them".

On the other hand, in the gender restructuring project, messaging revolved around the need to change prevalent gender norms among adolescents and local communities. Multiple aspects of gendered roles (e.g. a boy is strong and a girl is weak), respectful relationships, equitable decision-making and consent are unpacked by program experts. Additionally, these messages are also localised through pre-intervention workshops with opinion leaders, religious leaders, families and young people to make these relevant for local communities. A research participant (program director) stressed integrating "terms and expressions that young people and their families use in a given context" into messages to better "connect with the communities on their issues." In stakeholder engagement with policymakers and media, the expressions and terms used by local communities and schoolchildren were brought up to establish meaningful dialogues. A participant (program director) explained how gender is simplified for policymakers through "reflections of children" and "how their family saw those changes in their own context in their space".

Hence, a strategic communicator must not only unpack the deeper messages integral to project approaches but also remain open to understanding whether and how messages resonate with local publics. Messaging may serve different purposes, given that the participatory projects aim for community ownership and the behaviour change programs seek new behavioural outcomes. Nevertheless, analysing how messages are interpreted and modified by local communities remains critical in achieving meaningful development and social change.

(3) Media/channels

The selection of media and channels is fundamental to delivering SC plans. This research revealed that public events, conferences and workshops act as vehicles or channels for achieving program goals. In the project aiming for participatory development, public events manifest as celebrations around religious festivals or public holidays at a local slum, grassroots rallies to gather public support or workshops to discuss local problems at the grassroots level. These events see community representatives design and run activities. Community-owned and driven media such as graphic art, pictorial books and street plays also prove useful in delivering relevant messages. A participant (grassroots worker) explained how they use "folk

songs in their training programs to summarise everything” to ensure that the lessons are remembered. Essentially, the aspect of localising media and messages remains critical and can demand recognising Indigenous models and subalternity here (Manyozo, 2017).

Furthermore, at national and regional levels, public events act as platforms for community groups to present their issues to state and national government officials, funding agencies and media personnel. According to research participants, these events facilitate meaningful external stakeholder engagement. Written materials in the form of brochures, pamphlets, memorandums and referendums are used to mobilise support or effect policy change.

Alternatively, when behaviour change is the intended outcome, face-to-face meetings and small events prove useful to discuss and unpack the intricacies of non-communicable diseases or gender at the grassroots level. Whereas at regional and national levels, conferences and events are important for expanding programs through government partnerships. These events prove useful in promoting projects and approaches. A participant (program director) observed that regional/national events also witness the usage of community-generated media to engage with conference participants, over and above the “reports, briefs, and presentations for stakeholders in the government.”

In terms of meaning-making, media, channels and messages are effective when distinct contexts are understood and recognised (Holtzhausen and Zeffass, 2014). A strategic communicator must be wary of broader contextual criteria such as where an event is taking place (local, regional, national), the core values or vision driving a program (community-owned or behaviour change) and distinct cultural settings. These criteria around media and channels can enable a strategic communicator to design and carry out more meaningful promotion, advocacy, stakeholder engagement or community engagement highlighted in this study.

(4) Internal and external stakeholders

Given a growing emphasis on collective action in SC and development communication scholarship, a comprehensive understanding of internal and external stakeholders is critical to conceptualise SC. In terms of internal stakeholders’ communication, this study reveals that communication between program teams (managing the project) and the organisational communication teams remains ad hoc because promotion and fundraising dominate the communication agendas of development organisations. Also, grassroots communication is far removed from the organisational communication managers’ priorities affecting external communication planning at the local level. Consequently, community representatives and grassroots workers can be found to conceptualise events and plans at the local level with limited input from communication experts. Systematic involvement of communication experts, program experts, grassroots workers and community representatives might not always be present in SC in development projects.

Wider participation of internal and external stakeholders (Holtzhausen and Zeffass, 2014) in project-related communication can be a challenge for a strategic communicator. The internal communication manager requires greater agency to conceptualise comprehensive communication programs, and the organisational heads need to create systems to integrate community voices into communication in programs. Research participants offered some suggestions that might prove useful in addressing these institutional hurdles facing SC around projects. For example, a participant (program manager) suggested making communication a criterion in the project outcome matrices so that it receives adequate attention in development planning and execution throughout. Another participant (communication manager) proposed overhauling organisational values, integrating communication thinking and shifting the focus from organisational publicity to human development in communication. From these perspectives, SC can be considered integral to achieving human development, and the greater participation of internal and external stakeholders can become a prerequisite for achieving better communication outcomes in projects.

Evaluation is often guided by aims and objectives in SC. In the context of development projects, how a group or an organisation views and approaches development and social change can significantly impact what is evaluated in a project. This study reveals that the participatory development projects focused on grassroots community empowerment and social action. Hence, SC can be measured in terms of the agency of communities and their participation here. Whereas the behaviour change projects emphasised newer behaviour towards gender and non-communicable health problems. Therefore, evaluation in this context can revolve around the adoption of healthy behaviour.

Further, evaluation criteria for SC in projects can be segmented more by understanding communication as inseparable from a development or social change process. In this regard, the categories revealed by this research captured the diversity of communication requirements in four distinct projects at multiple levels (stakeholder and community engagement, community ownership, rights and dignity, advocacy, and promotion) and can act as broader classifications to evaluate SC plans and programs. When carefully considered in relation to the nature of a project, these classifications can streamline evaluation criteria further. For example, evaluation under promotion can mean event promotion, issue promotion or fundraising depending on the context. Evaluation under advocacy can mean sociopolitical rights and voice in communication in participatory programs, whereas this classification might be less relevant for a behaviour change program. Community ownership can be a universal evaluation item in social change and development, given the need to achieve sustainability in communication in any project (Servaes *et al.*, 2012).

Essentially, the qualitative aspect of discursiveness and meaning or sense-making (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Obregón and Tufte, 2017) must be carefully considered in the evaluation matrices. A broader understanding of the context and its significance for SC plans, media and messages; the meaning of communication or messages for the implementors of a project and the intended recipients; the aspect of community ownership and stakeholder participation in SC; or the meaning of SC for different stakeholders are all critical here.

Finally, when the qualitative aspects of evaluation have been addressed, the quantitative aspects of the number of communication events, media releases, posts, brochures, learning notes, manifestos and dissemination products can be included as indicators to achieve expansiveness in SC.

Discussion and conclusion

Social change and development can represent initiatives of governments, international humanitarian organisations, social movements, community collectives, national NGOs and so on. Hence, SC can be understood in multiple ways and contexts in social change and development. In this paper, SC was examined in relation to the development projects of mid-sized development organisations. Grounded in research methodologies around participatory planning and action and changing gender norms or negative health behaviours, the projects proved useful in understanding communication around sociopolitical networking and behaviour change aspects of development and social change.

The eight communication categories emphasising processes and functions around stakeholder engagement, advocacy, community engagement, community empowerment and promotion captured the broad scope of communication around development projects from the perspective of research participants. Given that SC is deeply persuasive and goal-driven (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014; Heath *et al.*, 2018), the eight categories were considered deliberate and a point of departure for imagining SC in development projects. At the same time, the changing scholarly focus on “participatory effectiveness” (Heath *et al.*, 2018, pp. 13–14), emergent strategy (King, 2009), internal and external stakeholder

participation (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2014), collective action (Obregón and Tufte, 2017; Waisbord, 2014) and a comprehensive societal contextualisation (Heath *et al.*, 2018) demanded a deeper investigation into communication processes underpinning projects.

In this regard, the projects focusing on sociopolitical networking and behaviour change in development shed light on the complex communication processes around developmental activities in practice. In the participatory development projects, the project planners and implementors innately paid heed to local culture, sustainability and community-sensitive development and worked as facilitators from the outset, envisaging thriving community networks. The sociopolitical aspects of community voice, human agency and ownership in development that are also discussed in participatory communication scholarship (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006; Waisbord, 2020) foregrounded social action here. Whereas the behaviour change projects sought community participation to achieve favourable behaviour change outcomes around gender or non-communicable health disorders among the intended beneficiaries. Here too, local learnings and community participation and ownership were crucial and drove programs. However, the technicalities of non-communicable diseases and gender were unpacked more frequently by program experts to achieve favourable communication outcomes here. Regardless, community ownership, stakeholder engagement, community engagement, advocacy and promotion remain critical areas that can underpin SC in development practice.

Crucially, given the multiplicity of approaches and varying contexts in development and social change, “participation and effectiveness” in SC (Heath *et al.*, 2018, p. 13) around development projects demand an ongoing enquiry and critical reflection. While program effectiveness requires a critical appraisal of the organisational purpose and mission and the consequent deliberateness in strategy, participation would mean investigating the nature of public and community engagement (Sison, 2017) and dialogue (Paquette *et al.*, 2015) in SC in projects. A critical assessment of community ownership and participation and stakeholder engagement also remains important because development must be driven and owned by local communities instead of promoting colonial, western or neoliberal ideas in developing countries (Dutta, 2011; Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Wilkins *et al.*, 2014).

In this regard, it is important to note that some areas underpinning SC (goal-setting, message strategy, media/channel, internal and external stakeholders and evaluation) can represent the goal-directedness of the project implementation organisation. However, SC’s discursiveness determines its utility for development and social change in practice. A strategic communicator must be prepared to deeply examine the communication processes underpinning development and social change. Ultimately, SC plans and the resulting messages and media must be grounded in the process of social change and development that is driven by the collective action of institutions and communities. Crucially, because social change and development are for and about local communities, community voice must be central to both planning and action in SC in projects.

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Corresponding author

Bhupesh Joshi can be contacted at: bhupesh.joshi@uts.edu.au