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An Appraisal of the Internal and Public Communication Dynamics and Challenges of International Development Organisations: Implications for Integrated Communications Management

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Abstract

Communication plays a pivotal role in organisational effectiveness. The nature, scope, and scale of operations of different organisations have significant impact on the purpose, philosophy and pattern of communication. This paper examines the dynamics of internal and external communication in international development organisations. It presents a critique of the various communication approaches adopted by these agencies and the challenges encountered. The paper establishes how a lack of integrated communication is undermining their communication effectiveness. It proposes the harmonization of communication approaches to enhance communication effectiveness and ultimately, the realization of organizational mandate. International development organizations need to shift their communication processes in line with new trends in integrated and interactive communication. The paper also argues for a repositioning of communication function to elevate its value in achieving organization goals.

Introduction

International development organizations are a major part of the contemporary global institutional system, with mandates, programmes, and interventions to promote human and social development. The United Nations System alone has over 50 specialised agencies and programmes for specific social and development issues many of which feature in Africa. Bilateral organizations funded by industrialised countries are also in place to achieve societal transformation and social justice. The nature and operations of these organizations have implications for internal and public communication, both of which require continuous academic inquiry.

In tandem with the evolution of international development programming, considerable research effort has been devoted to studying the public communication and advocacy activities of transnational organizations (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Rugendyke, 2007; Mbizo, Chou, & Shaw, 2013; Fayoyin, 2013). However, limited attention has been focused on bringing both internal and public communication into a unified perspective.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the dynamics of corporate communication in multi-lateral organizations. In particular, it examines their internal and external communication imperatives, approaches and challenges. The goal is to assess their overall communication philosophy and practice, and to advance strategies for greater effectiveness.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first part deals with the rationale for effective internal communication, a review of selected internal communication modalities, and the challenges that confront this role. The second section focuses on public communication, its imperatives, and approaches. Finally, the paper offers recommendations for enhancing integrated communication management in international development organizations. In particular, it argues for a repositioning of communication function in the operations of these organizations.

The study adopted a qualitative research method, using information from key informants and observations made by participants. The author conducted a total of 50 interviews with key informants from UN staff in East and Southern Africa from 2010-2017, then transcribed and analysed the data thus collected. The study also incorporated observations of communication programming functions in three international agencies (USAID, UNICEF, and UNFPA) which spanned a period of more than 25 years during which the author worked and gained experience in organizations. Insights from the participant observations assisted in framing some of the author's views on public communication approaches and challenges.

Section One: Internal communication in international organisations

Communication is at the heart of organisational functioning. Burnes (2004) argues that it is pivotal to organisational coordination and connectivity. Peter Drucker (2007) opines that communication provides the link for various organisational roles and responsibilities, and for performance; it is also critical to building organisational systems. This position is affirmed by others who contend that communication is the thread that connects all strands of any organisation. For instance, David (2006) argues that communication facilitates interaction among the various business units in an organisation (corporate, divisional, and strategic), and fosters interaction among the respective elements of strategic management (strategy formulation, strategy implementation and strategy evaluation). Thus, communication is at the heart and soul of organisational functioning and is fundamental to strategic management processes.

Contemporary organisational structures reflect several levels of staff, work modalities and institutional operations. Organisations may be hierarchical, circular or horizontal. Others may be more matrix-oriented and without the significant hierarchies of traditional management approaches. Regardless of the structure, communication is needed to connect all elements within organizations so they can be aligned with the corporate goals and corporate vision.

Communication is imperative for staff motivation and engagement. To Yates (2006), effective internal communication promotes employee engagement and eventually contributes to an organisation's bottom-line. Other studies affirm the influence of communication in leveraging a high level of staff engagement and enhancing organisational effectiveness (Edelman Change and Employee Management, 2009; 2006). Besides, it has long been found that organizations which practice excellence tend to involve high calibre people through the power of communication (Peters and Wiseman, 1982). According to Bevan and Bailey (2002), internal communication is non-negotiable in building employee commitment because part of the role of managers and leaders is making teams from different people working together. Thus, it is argued that staff motivation cannot take place without effective communication.

Furthermore, communication is fundamental to achieving organisational change. The view that more effective communication is required to manage change has been in circulation for several decades (DiFonzo and Bordia, 1998; Smelz and Zener, 1992). In a comprehensive treatise on managing change, Burnes (2004) argues that effective communication helps to avoid uncertainties associated with organisational change,

while Kotter (1996) identifies weak communication in respect of change as one of the reasons why change initiatives fail in organizations. Both authors maintain that employees may have intellectual and emotional difficulties in understanding the changes in organizations which need to be addressed by managers. This is part of the challenge that adequate communication helps to address.

Some of the specific communication requirements that facilitate organisational change include helping staff to understand the rationale for and ramifications of change. Using multiple platforms for communication, ensuring there is repetition for reinforcement of messages, and finding appropriate approaches to address opposition through effective explanation are other reasons for organizations to communicate. (Daly, Teague & Kitchen, 2003; Kotter, 1996).

Other studies have also established the importance of communication in innovation and the innovativeness of organizations (Carlson & Wilmot, 2006; Ruppel & Harrington, 2000). They concluded that communication is a key ingredient in every step of the innovation process. More recent investigations into the topic has led to suggestions that communication makes or breaks organisations' capacity for innovation. (Hulsmann & Pfeffermann 2011; Luoma-aho & Halonen, 2010).

Specific communication issues that must be addressed for organizations to achieve their innovativeness include the ability to manage resistance to change; listen to various ideas; facilitate organisational learning for the incubation of creative ideas; encourage various workers to bring new perspectives to their jobs; and promote discussions on how to optimise innovation. These are shaped by the internal communication dynamics. Without a supportive internal communication culture, it will be difficult for innovation to thrive.

Overall, internal communication is critical for the effectiveness and coherence of all organizations. The deployment of a connected, committed, engaged and empowered workforce has great potential to transform any organisation's profile and positioning. However, significant internal mobilisation would be needed within the context of corporate communication to empower and encourage employees as organisational advocates.

Internal communication approaches

To achieve their mandate and vision, international agencies adopt a variety of methods and tactics for internal or employee communication. These include the use of printed and electronic communication; digital and traditional forms of

communication; as well as access to formal and informal networks. There are diverse types of workplace engagement procedures for interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup and broader organisational communication.

Tactics used to facilitate employee advocacy are often tied to opportunities provided in the work environment which facilitates learning and teaching of organisational goals. These include staff education on the mandate of the organisation, channelling motivation through organisational vision, encouraging the culture of information sharing, intense organisational learning, consistent internal branding, and recognition of staff who have demonstrated results as brand champions or ambassadors.

Engaging staff as advocates enables organizations to build employees' leadership skills, their capability and commitment through effective involvement and empowerment. Investing in staff capabilities to enable them deliver better returns on investment is yet another tactic. So is the rallying of internal experts to serve as advocates. These enhance the profile of the organisation and its products.

Internal processes for knowledge management are essential for internal communication. This is because international organizations generate a vast amount of knowledge that employees must use. Knowledge management strategy is therefore very important to help oversee vast knowledge assets and products that are generated and relied upon within international development organizations.

However, questions have been raised on the effectiveness of these approaches in enhancing their internal coherence and corporate positioning. Ngwainmbi (2014) observes that to achieve organisational enhancement and effective coordination in a global context, development agencies need to consider their communication practices. One can argue that this is because, many of the approaches within these agencies still focus on traditional organisational communication practices. They privilege the use of communication department as the mouthpiece of management; the publication of 'house organs', over strategic deployment of internal communication to achieve organisational results, enhance staff citizenship, foster organisational change, and broker innovation.

Below, we present a synthesis of the gaps in the internal communication processes of multilateral organizations such as United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Labour Organizations (ILO), World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP). This synthesis is based on findings from key informants interviews conducted from

2012-2017 with representatives of the organizations. It also integrates participants' observation of the author during this period.

Pitfalls in internal communication

Inadequate recognition of internal communication

While it has been established that effective employee communication is pivotal to organisational effectiveness, it is rarely prioritised by most international development organizations. According to key informants, many of the organizations do not regard strategic internal communication as a critical management function. In addition, many agencies do not have established internal communication posts or professionals, especially in their country or regional offices. Where they exist, internal communication practices are used more for internal publicity, inter-office competition and information dissemination rather than for facilitating robust organisational conversations around issues and employee engagement.

Information overload

Information overload is one of the perennial challenges of international development organizations. Some key informants suggest that they have close to 2000 work-related emails in their inboxes that they have not attended to by the end of each year. Others speak of "too much to read with too little time"; "we are flooded with information"; "it is hectic"; "we are distracted by having to respond to too many requests"; "we are overloaded"; or "it is simply dizzying!"

The causes of information overload in development organizations are multifarious. Some relate to the nature of the industry, which is constantly evolving, while others emanate from the lack of discipline in the use of digital media by staff. There are instances when replies to messages for specific staff members are relayed to all in general, adding to the torrent of emails that daily flood the staff inboxes. As one informant said, "we are cursed with the send button!"

Message miscommunication

Message understanding is a fundamental element in the communication process, and effective communication is said to have taken place when a message is understood in the form that the source intended. Yet, miscommunication is a common occurrence in many international development organizations. This is accentuated by their overreliance on email as the main tool for communication in these organizations.

Interference, distortion and 'noise' affect message fidelity; communication effectiveness in bureaucracies such as multilateral development agencies is thus hampered. The multi-sectoral approach to work adopted within these organizations, coupled with the intergovernmental collaborations in different countries within and between regions only compound this. Furthermore, the speed of response often required when responding to topical occurrences makes this a high pressure work environment. There is a tendency among staff, to consider the mere sending of information to be communication. A key informant, using the folk etymology of the Tower of Babel, describes the misunderstanding over messaging – confusion in the language of international development professionals - as “the Babel Syndrome”

Multicultural and personality differences

The staffing structure of international organizations also presents a major communications challenge. Most development organizations are multiracial, multicultural and multinational. Brett, Behfar & Kern (2006, p.3) identify four discernible patterns of challenges in an international organisational context as: direct versus indirect communication, trouble with accents and fluency, differing attitudes toward the hierarchy and authority, and conflicting norms for decision making.

As a practical example, in 2010 UNICEF Malawi country office had staff from 15 countries spanning all the continents of the world. Similarly, in 2015, the UNAIDS regional office in South Africa housed staff from at least 10 countries. Multiculturalism is a potential asset to nurture and to adequately harness. However, it poses some communication challenges such as managing different cultural and personal nuances, and perceptions. Field evidence from various organizations demonstrates that cultural and personality differences are major barriers which confront international agencies. The differences manifest in the difficulty of managing interpersonal relationships, and sometimes dysfunctional teams and may contribute to the next challenge identified below.

Culture of silence

Findings from empirical studies on the power of voice in organisational theory suggest that the employee voice serves as an adaptive tool in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing work environment (Ashford, Sutcliffe, & Christianson, 2009).

Evidence from our qualitative research indicates the pervasiveness of a culture of silence in many development agencies. While this varies from office to office, it is generally established that many employees in different offices are not open and

transparent in discussing major management issues mainly because of the intense organisational politics that take place and the fear of reprisal for confronting or contradicting the bosses. Ideally, a favourable environment that encourages free expression would encourage the culture of transparency and not the spiral of silence. However, according to the responses of key informants, this is not the case. Perlow and Williams (2011) argue that the 'reign of silence' starts when staff members choose not to confront issues but allow the problem to simmer for a long time. This becomes harmful to such organizations. Our data shows that in many multilateral agencies the tendency is toward a reign of silence.

Section Two – Why engaging public communication matters for international development organisations

Public communication is fundamental to the operations of international development organizations. It is essential to help position issues that agencies seek to advance. This makes it an essential within organisations' external communication. (Ngwainmbi 2014). The quality of public engagement enhances the profile and image of the international development agencies. There are many reasons for engaging in public communication, as the following summary will indicate.

The imperatives for public communication

Most development agencies are under constant scrutiny to justify their existence. Against the backdrop of on-going discussions about the real impact of development programming, agencies are required to demonstrate their relevance and added-value. Critics of development aid such as Easterly (2002) have accused development agencies (including the UN organizations) of performing poorly on a number of issues. To the author, the rhetoric of aid effectiveness by development agencies is far from reality as many of them perform below expectations. The Multi-lateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, comprising 16 donor organizations evaluates the performance of multilateral organizations in achieving development effectiveness. (Balogun, Iseman, Poate, & Hildenwall, 2013). Thus to influence public opinion and donor perceptions on their performance, international agencies has resorted to extensive public communication initiatives.

Given their history and remit, humanitarian interventions are key elements in the work of many multilateral agencies. They are also required to show results of their work in this domain of humanitarian interventions. Most aid agencies have developed strategies for engaging with the media during humanitarian or emergency situations

in order to demonstrate how they are actively involved in life-saving interventions. Such media advocacy activities, are in part, expected to position their issues in the public sphere and also promote their corporate image.

Reputation management have become critical components of aid agency operations which necessitates concerted media advocacy and public communication activities. This is another imperative. Image is an intangible quality which can be affected by negative publicity or poor visibility - hence the desire by development agencies to invest in image making and branding exercises. In the last ten years, several UN agencies have gone through rounds of rebranding in order to refresh their image. In some cases, to enhance visibility in line with the new brand, a targeted programme is put in place with the assistance of public relations consultants. For example, UNICEF (2014) argued that branding is associated with fundraising. This accounts for substantial investment to enhance the UNICEF brand. In line with the need for greater visibility in respect of the UN, the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review encourages all UN funds, programmes and specialised agencies to expend more effort in further improving their communication concerning their mandates to the general public.

A fourth imperative is seen when international development agencies are dealing with long-standing and complicated issues that are susceptible to social apathy, media misrepresentation and controversy. Esan, (2001) identifies diverse challenges that media confront when reporting reproductive rights issues in Nigeria. These include poor understanding of reproductive issues, the conflicting priorities – for example the reticence of editors to cover less familiar or contentious issues when faced with soft news items more likely to attract attention that meets the media organisation's desire to sell newspapers or increase the broadcast audience ratings. These tendencies also point to weak capacity of certain media professionals. Like Esan, Panos (2003) points to tendency for journalists to sensationalise reports of social problems such as HIV and AIDS. The report also notes gatekeeping gaffes when treating reports on health issues, and poor interface between programmers and media professionals.

Many development agencies have records of instances where reporting on social, health and development issues was poor. It is broadly recognised in journalism that coverage of science, health, development and population tends to be inadequate, compared to that of mainstream favourites such as politics, business and sports. As noted above, there is a matrix of reasons that account for poor reporting of health and development. Each may be compounded by others. So the complex nature of health issues, poor understanding of development imperatives and programmes, the desire for scoops by some journalists, may account for gatekeeping gaffes in the

course of treating health issues, or speculations that result from accounts based on incomplete information received from development agencies. Further explanations include lack of preparedness and failure to provide timely information. Also critical is the poor communication between scientists and media professionals. To address these challenges, many aid agencies have put strong media advocacy programmes in place.

On the whole, the context of development reporting is fraught with contestation, opposition and indifference. Many development and public health interventions have experienced significant opposition, misinformation and controversies in various aspects of international development (Klugman, 2011; Pisanni, 2008). Fayoyin cites several examples of this, including crisis over the quality, supply and promotion of condoms in Kenya (2014, p. 199). The widely reported controversy over polio immunisation in northern Nigeria, (Kaufmann & Feldbaum, 2009; Agbeyede, 2007; Obadare, 2005); and public misunderstanding in terms of the 'protective effect' of medical male circumcision for HIV prevention (Wang, Duke, & Schmid, 2009) further stress the imperative of public communication. The media serve as the battleground for such controversies, therefore, continuous public communication and engagement are necessary to promote better public understanding, the expected institutional or systemic changes being advocated by aid agencies.

Approaches to public communication

To enhance their public image and issue positioning, international organizations adopt several approaches, a few of which are described below:

Media advocacy

Media advocacy is the strategic use of the mass media in combination with community organizations to advance healthy public policies. It takes a citizens' approach to the mass media rather than a consumer approach. It involves the strategic deployment of mass media to advance social or public policy initiatives. Its goal is to stimulate debate and dialogue, and to diagnose the problem around an issue. Media advocacy is premised on the pivotal role of the mass media in shaping public debates and keeping issues on the public agenda (Dorfman & Krasnow, 2014).

Following are some generic methods of media mobilisation relied upon by development agencies.

- **Capacity building in media professionals:** The rationale for building capacity is to ensure that media professionals are given an in-depth knowledge of relevant (for example population) issues to enable them report effectively and accurately. It is generally believed that non-experts have relative difficulty in understanding population and demographic issues. Such capacity-building sessions involve training programmes of varying durations; there are day long orientation workshops, short-term inductions, fellowships, and the integration of population reporting in the curricula of institutions for communication and journalism.
- **Sponsored field project visits:** Project visits are used to provide first-hand information on various aspects of population issues. On account of financial and other constraints, many journalists are unable to undertake such field trips to help them document cases and develop stories with appropriate human-interest perspectives. Project visits are arranged to convey journalists to locations in various communities. This was to facilitate the production of persuasive human interest stories. The logic is that such exposure moves media professionals to break from being reliant on press kits to reporting real-life experiences. Experience from field trips when used to supplement information gleaned from capacity-building sessions, provide practical field perspectives especially on population dynamics.
- **Development and distribution of targeted information packages:** International organizations support the development of information packages, including fact sheets, videos, info-graphics, press kits, photo stories, multi-media productions, country kits, state-of-the-world population reports, and other publications. These are expected to provide a constant stream of information for media professionals and inform them as advocates on developments in population programmes. Information packages may be in the form of programme updates, assessments and situation analyses, research findings, epidemiological information, and other forms of data or evidence. The goal is to enhance the media professionals' understanding of specific technical issues and attract their attention to an otherwise 'non-sexy' news beat.
- **Establishment of media networks for population and development:** Many intergovernmental organizations have also supported the establishment of networks of reporters and journalists on specific issues notably health, environment, family planning, and HIV, among others. Such networks are designed to promote synergies and collaborations amongst local media organizations. They are also intended to strengthen the capacity of journalists

and their organizations, to improve pro-population reporting on a regular basis, raise frequency and prominence of relevant media output (news stories and Radio/TV programmes). They should also foster institutional learning through knowledge sharing and management. For example, UNFPA has supported the establishment of a population and development media network in countries such as Malawi, Kenya, The Gambia, Madagascar, Ethiopia and Zambia. While the network has increased media coverage of population issues in countries such as Kenya, it has not always been effective in other countries such as Zambia. Challenges to the attainment of the mission include the funding for such networks and the mobility of the trained media personnel.

- **Engagement with media gatekeepers:** Recognising the critical role of media gate-keepers in the news management process, UNICEF, UNAIDS, UN Women, and UNFPA undertake targeted briefing and orientation sessions for senior editors, sub-editors, production management and the chief executives of media organizations on various aspects of population and development. This is intended to facilitate commitment at the gate-keeping level to improve coverage of health and development issues. Tactics used to engage them include study tours, special working sessions, and briefing workshops - both formal and informal. The overall goal of this is to influence media gatekeepers, make them more inclined and competent in treating development and health topics. The initiatives should make them more supportive of these stories in the face of competition from economics, politics and sport that tend to dominate the media.
- **Incentives/Awards:** In many UNFPA countries, annual awards for media professionals in population reporting are organised as a form of recognition of performance, and to stimulate more media interest. Award categories include maternal health, gender-based violence, fistula, female genital mutilation/cutting, and child health reporting. The need for awards has been identified as a form of motivation and an incentive to sustain media interest in social and development issues.

Social media engagement

Advances in media digitalisation has created more numerous social media platforms which can be deployed for public information and advocacy. In our primary research, we asked respondents to rank the impact of information and communication

technologies (ICT) on development interventions. Eight out of ten respondents agreed that current developments in ICT have created new opportunities for multi-level advocacy. An exceedingly small percentage (5 per cent) disagreed. This shows that most of the respondents agree that the digital media have majorly impacted development advocacy.

New media platforms and processes have become a major tool in advocacy and social activism. Various information and communication technologies and platforms are being used for social media advocacy. These include websites, email newsletters, blogs, news feeds, games, and many others.

Globally the opportunities are more than access to mere products, which facilitate old style unidirectional communication and passive reception. Current trends offer more innovative participatory messaging. This includes immersive storytelling, integrated photo services, web interfaces, interactive social projects, open-source software, remote procedure calls, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality. Indeed, the world now has the "Internet of Things". An article in the Guardian (2016) affirms how the convergence of media and technology in charity organizations is creating new patterns of communication and forms of storytelling that have more impact in society. New media have ushered in what has been described as 'we media' or 'the participatory media generation', in which those who are traditionally referred to as 'audiences' in communication studies have become significant 'participants' in the news and information process. The combination of these characteristics has resulted in a newfound optimism that the creation of a 'new ecosystem' (Wilson & Murby 2010).

Most development agencies are now investing in and implementing activities to maximise the power of social media in influencing public discourse and public agenda as part of their advocacy and social mobilisation programmes. This has a dual purpose, namely to connect with the public in order to stimulate private conversation on the issues, and to put pressure on decision makers based on outcomes of public discussion on those issues.

Social media campaigns on a variety of social issues are undertaken online. Such online advocacy can be used to grow subscribers, donors, supporters. Social media is now being used to implement mandates, execute agenda and derive results within development agencies. This has become a daily occurrence.

Public campaigns

Campaigns serve as a major tactical approach in the public communication processes of development agencies. Rice and Atkin (2013) define public communication campaigns

“[A]s purposive attempts to inform and influence the behaviour of large audiences within a specific time period, using an organised set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels - generally to produce non-commercial benefits to individuals and society”.
(p. 3)

Campaigns have inherent uses in development advocacy. Interviews with key informants revealed that campaigns are used to raise awareness through multiple channels of communication, to enhance the use of new evidence to stimulate public discourse and to influence public opinion and public engagement on issues. Other uses are that they help to arouse attention to relevant issues in the media, on public and policy agenda, and to partnerships or coalitions which support these issues. Yet these campaigns are fraught with several weaknesses. Impact created could be ephemeral, links between expected and actual outcomes could be weak, and there could be a lack of continuity in campaign outcomes such that change becomes difficult to sustain.

Use of special events

The international development terrain is replete with several special events – international, regional, national and local - for public information and engagement with different audiences. The development industry has also created a multitude of events for different themes and issues. One of the highlights of public information in the UN is the commemoration of international observances.

The UN has a list of over a hundred observances annually, each one with a specific theme and associated activities, organized by corresponding agencies and interest groups. The goals of these special events may vary, but they are designed to raise visibility and promote specific actions by the sponsoring agency. Events serve as opportunities and platforms to advocate in favour of various social issues. They are also avenues for national, regional, and local advocacy, and opportunities to report on relevant issues in the national, regional and global media.

In 2013, the UN commemorated 102 observances, each one with a specific theme and activities by corresponding agencies and interest groups to engage with the media and the public. To influence the media for adequate coverage, some of the special events are integrated into the annual work plans of the media networks, while appropriate thematic materials are prepared beforehand and distributed to media organizations.

In some cases, this is combined with the distribution of media advisories, press releases, briefing kits, or press alerts on the themes. Other media advocacy tactics carried out by aid agencies include the pitching of stories in high profile (glitzy) magazines, producing special broadcast programmes for mainstream media; commissioning infomercials and supplements on different issues, developing compelling stories on the impact of programme or media interventions writing or commissioning Op-Eds in a broad range of publications, participating in special reports and programmes to enhance the image of their executive leadership, and leveraging the reputation of other partners such as high-level political figures and research institutions. UN agencies also integrate thematic public campaigns into their media advocacy and other social communication activities to evoke positive response from the public.

Ultimately, international agencies undertake public communication for a variety of reasons. Such efforts are needed to influence the agenda of agenda setters and to get media gatekeepers to keep open the gates. The efforts shape what media organizations and professionals cover or do not cover in the area of public health and development. Similarly they influence the frames with which media organizations report on development issues. Aid agencies have also embraced institutional journalists who publish opinions and articles calling attention to a variety of issues on both institutional and public platforms. This is based on the need to address the gaps in information within processes of policy or political influence. It is also to promote specific development issues in the public domain. That said, there are pitfalls to watch out for in the use of public communication as will be discussed below.

External communication pitfalls

Competition for attention

Public communication by aid agencies results in competition for media attention and the promotion of institutional images. In an editorial entitled *The Growth of Aid and the Decline of Humanitarianism*, *The Lancet* (2010) alludes to this phenomenon:

“Media coverage as an end in itself is too often the aim of [the activities of aid agencies]. Marketing and branding have a high profile. Perhaps worst of all, relief efforts in the field are sometimes competitive, with little collaboration between agencies, including smaller, grass-roots charities that may have better networks in affected countries and so are well placed to immediately implement emergency relief.” (p.1)

Although the commentary was made within the context of humanitarian response by aid agencies, it applies to the various operational aspects of development agencies. This is because the aid environment is crowded, competitive and fragmentary (Easterly, 2002). The fragmentary nature of aid delivery reflects in the media work and other public communication activities. Field experience has shown that as there are several aid projects, so also are there multiple attempts to promote them. It is not uncommon to see the logos of different development agencies on the same project. It is also not uncommon to see the various press releases of aid agencies showing different statistics on the same issue. Consequently, there is fragmentation of information and sometimes contradictory information. Every agency wants its noise on specific issues to be heard; they like to have their flags waved through the media.

To address the criticism of the fragmentary approach to UN communications, efforts have been made for an interagency communications initiative. The UN Communication Group at country level helps to promote coherence in advocacy and media engagement. While joint communication has worked in some countries, it has not in others. (United Nations Communication Group (UNCG), 2009) (United Nations Communication Group (UNCG), 2009; United Nations Communication Group (UNCG), 2011). Many agencies still continue to carry out their branded communication campaigns and to promote their issues unilaterally. Thus, in some cases, media professionals are constantly contending with the overbearing posture of individual agencies or the combined actions of development organization in their news management process.

Potential for information distortion

In addressing issues of concern to them, international agencies want to influence policy as well as public and media agenda. Therefore, the intention in their communication activities is often to deliberately call attention to such issues. This approach to communication has significant implications for the manner in which to identify, frame and position issues. Corporate visibility is not antithetical to

development programming, however, an unbridled focus on assuring the visibility, branding and marketing of the cartel of aid agencies has implications for professional journalism.

Conceptually, campaigns are useful in galvanising public support on specific issues, but from the perspective of professional journalism, it can be argued that many campaigns do not give information which passes the 'So what?' test of media gatekeepers. They also tend to parade recycled information and serve as mere public relations outlets for development agencies.

This calls for greater sophistication from media professionals in their dealing with aid agencies. They should be well advised drawing on their professional ethics and mindful of the commitment to society when handling the barrage of media products, press releases, reports, briefing notes and programme advisories. They must remember the marketing and corporate promotions orientation of these.

Way forward – Harmonise internal and public communications

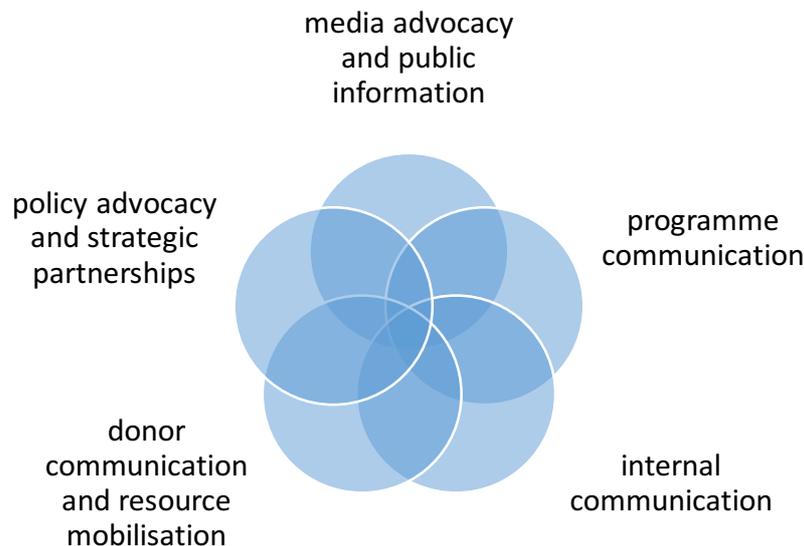
The central thesis in the foregoing has been to show that internal and public communication processes are critical to the operations of international aid organizations. At the internal level, communication is a glue that binds all of the organisational functions together. It is also essential to the external positioning of the organizations and their mandates. However, both communication functions suffer from a variety of pitfalls and challenges that vitiate their effectiveness in achieving internal coherence and external positioning. They also need to be integrated to function seamlessly.

This underpins the call for a renewed appreciation of the place and power of communication in international development agencies, and the need to position communication in achieving organisational mandates and strategic plans. Communication can no longer be treated as an appendage or ancillary operation in development organizations. Both internal and public communication must be seen as management functions, which are well-resourced and well positioned. To achieve this goal, the paper offers the following recommendations.

Integrated communication

The tapestry depicting communications functions that occur in these organizations is rich. From internal communication, to public information, donor communication, programme communication, and even communication in policy advocacy is included.

Many of these are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Therefore, it is important for development organizations to adopt an integrated communications approach for coherence and consistency in the range of relationships. Such interrelationships are illustrated in the diagram below.



Communications leadership

It is well established in management literature that communication is a chief function of managers (Burnes, 2004; Drucker, 2004; 2006). Moreover, proactive and effective communication by leaders is the fulcrum of organizations performing at a high level (Yates, 2006). Organisational leaders need to become more adept at communication.

According to Drucker (2006 p. 51), "great leaders may be charismatic or dull, generous or tight-fisted, visionary or numbers-oriented... but they take responsibility for communicating". And there are those (Conger, 2008; Morgan 2008) who counsel that managers who want to achieve results must change how they communicate and become more authentic communicators. Therefore, leadership of development agencies need to come out of technical cocoons and become more effective in communication.

These managers need to imbibe skills for effective internal communication, including listening and internal mobilisation. Myatt (2012), had argued that effective leaders are great listeners and are astute in their observations. These skills need to become part of the internal communications package of senior managers and cluster heads of aid agencies.

As a global survey on workforce engagement showed effective leadership communication combined with peer-to-peer communication are essential for employee engagement (Gallup, 2013). The report argues that to breed a culture of engagement and intensify rates of participation amongst staff, both formal and informal channels of communication; communication from leaders should be regular. In addition, leaders need to be adept at external communication, including public speaking, media engagement, storytelling and persuasion.

Communications training for programmers

Managers and programmers need to sharpen their skills in strategic communication. In the contemporary media and communications landscape, it is critical for professionals in development to be proficient in internal and external communication. For this, training workshops may be required. Such orientation workshops will not turn them into fully-fledged communication professionals, but exposure to appropriate communication training will empower them to be more effective leaders both internally and externally.

Last words

Communication plays a critical role in the management and operations of international development organizations. However, its potential has not been effectively realised on account of cultural, operational and institutional challenges. This paper argues for a repositioning of the communications function and practice in international organizations in order to achieve better internal and external communications impacts. A new approach is needed. Through such, high affectivity to agencies and their programmes can be recorded. It is through change of attitude towards communication that good results can be achieved with internal and external audiences of international development organizations.

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