

Understanding development in the Third World: how communication can enhance development

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Introduction

Effective communication is essential for the transfer of knowledge and information, which is critical for people to respond successfully to the opportunities and challenges of social, economic and technological changes, including those that help to improve agricultural productivity, food security and rural livelihoods. However, knowledge and information can only be useful when they are communicated clearly without misunderstanding and ambiguities (Dudley, 1993). In rural development, for instance, it has been argued that sustainable development can succeed only when development issues are communicated in processes that will help rural people to exchange experiences, find common ground for collaboration and actively participate in and manage rural development activities (Ramirez et al, 2004). There have been several cited cases of failures in projects and programmes in development, due to misunderstanding between development professionals and their clients either around cultural differences, policy explanation and concepts, academic background or attitudes of development professionals, by scholars such as Chambers (1995; 1997); Dudley (1993), McDonald and Hearle (1984). This article will try to identify and explain some of the issues that lead to misunderstanding between development professionals and their clients drawing on the writer's field experience as well as attempt to suggest ways by which the misunderstandings could be minimised.

Why misunderstanding in communication occurs and how this can be minimised

Development professionals have been described as those working for either non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government or donor organisations. These are mostly professionals with special skills in issues on development whilst the practitioners to a large extent are the implementers of policies and concepts and are also professionals but may live and work in communities where their lives have been influenced by their intimate

relationship with the people.

Some scholars have defined development professionals as outsiders because they do not live in and belong to the community (Chambers, 1993; 1997). On the other hand the clients are said to be the beneficiaries of development interventions; they are mostly poor deprived rural people. However, relationships between these people have sometimes suffered from misunderstandings in communication and have had negative effects on development interventions. One of the reasons given for this misunderstanding has been attributed to the background of the development professionals (Chambers, 1993). These backgrounds have been described in development literature as mostly academic, abstract and theoretical and often unable to communicate issues for their poor illiterate rural clients to associate with, understand and accept (Chambers, 1993, 1997; Dudley, 1993; and MacDonald, 1984). For example, issues of accountability, rights based approaches and gender mainstreaming have been viewed as a collection of ideas, values, and concepts which are meaningful in an academic world but need to be converted into the values of their clients (Dudley, 1993). In addition, Eade and Williams (1995) argue that the concept of gender and its importance in development work is often misunderstood and meets resistance because it challenges comfortable assumptions such as women's inability to participate in critical decision-making processes. Hence understanding and accepting these concepts vary from community to community depending on beliefs, customs and cultures; and hence absolute care must be taken not to generate conflicts within households and communities in trying to advance on these issues (Woods, 1993). On the other hand, it could also be argued that those who communicate these concepts to the clients themselves do not understand them and hence might be communicating wrongly (MacDonald, 1984). Therefore, to avoid this misunderstanding it has been suggested that development professionals should shift their skewed view of reality, which makes them see things differently from their clients to a level where much more research will be made to understand the background of their clients on issues of culture and belief systems, knowledge level and operational context. This would also require the redesigning of appropriate concepts to communicate to their clients. This means the shifting away from their "programmed" thinking and reasoning (Chambers, 1997).

Secondly, the language used by development professionals has been described as full of jargon with imprecise meaning and subject to multiple interpretations. It is often stale and full of clichés because it has to be academic and reflect the latest thinking and terms, for example, words like participation, empowerment, sustainable livelihood, impact and outcomes

(Eade et al, 1998). These words are not easily translated into local dialects for rural folks to understand in the daily vocabulary of a simple community (Dudley, 1993). Dudley goes further to argue that for many people it is difficult to listen to conversations in anything other than their first language which means, at best, missing the subtle nuances which in some cases arise in the use of translators. An example from the author's personal experience is translating the terms "impact" and "outcomes" into the Tumbuka language in Northern Malawi. In this language these words mean the same and therefore are difficult to differentiate. As posited by Chambers (1993) because of the difficulty in translating this 'jargon' there is a tendency of sometimes shifting the attention from the key development related issues to self-esteem. The more jargon you use in communicating the more 'good you feel' about being an experienced development worker, thereby widening the communication gap and often confusing the clients.

Avoiding the use of jargon can make communication effective thereby keeping the focus on issues affecting the clients' well-being and how best these can be addressed in a participatory and sustainable manner. This means that for an idea to be adopted it must make sense in terms of the intended user's own rationale (MacDonald & Hearle, 1984). It must be clear what aspect of the idea is new within the context of existing knowledge and it must fit into the understanding of the social fabric of responsibilities and skills. In order to understand what other people will consider reasonable it is necessary to find ways of learning about the criteria, knowledge and priorities of others (Warburton, 1998).

Another reason why communication is prone to misunderstanding is that some development professionals have been described as being superior and unwilling to learn from their clients, thereby failing to communicate new ideas or issues in an acceptable form. This superiority, as suggested by Chambers (1997) could be as a result of their position, culture or wealth among others. These professionals have been seen as using the outcomes of experiments in social laboratories as scientific theories of universal application and using generic terms which lose their meaning when translated into the context of their clients. Examples of this have been demonstrated in farming and formal research and its implication to improve agriculture for sustainable livelihoods for rural farmers (Gupta 1989; Chambers, 1992, 1993; Biggs, 1991; Sumberg & Okali, 1997). This example is an illustration of how sometimes development professionals can be general in their approach to development and dismissive of the views of their clients. This negligence is sometimes attributed to professionals identifying themselves with the organisations they work with and not with the community they 'seek' to serve. Therefore, as Woods (1993) argues, people

want self respect no matter their economic circumstances. They want to be respected by their peers and anyone dealing with them, which implies that by respecting their clients, listening, dialoguing and encouraging participation in development approaches professionals will be able to understand and appreciate the reasoning behind a chosen solution by clients. This is likely to reduce the misunderstanding between professionals and clients. As Chambers posited:

“power hinders learning. Those who were wrong were powerful. They were senior, all men, mostly white, and influential, whether through aid, professional authority, control of or funds position in hierarchy. Their very power conditioned their perception and prevented them from learning. However, power deceives” (1997, p.76).

The political flavour given to development has made development professionals more interested in statistics to the extent that they sometimes ignored the impact and quality of the services provided; more interested in how much money has been spent in the community. Pride in listing what amenities have been provided, and the number of people benefiting as well as the new paradigm of participatory development have led to the use of tools such as participatory rural approaches and reflections (Eade, 2003). Chambers (1992) further argues that these approaches, if not used correctly, have the tendency to generate misunderstanding and conflict because they may raise expectations or depress the interest of their clients especially when clients are asked to list and prioritise their needs in a time consuming Participatory Rural Appraisal exercise only to be told later that funds available can not address all their needs or must be used to provide for something outside the needs of the clients. That apart, Warburton (1998) suggests that the thrust of the problem is that the attributes of the people are difficult to measure. Their individual behaviour is unpredictable, and quantification and statistics can mislead, distract, be wasteful, simply not make sense, or conflict with common values. What is measured may also not be what matters to the client. To minimise such misunderstanding and expectation, Chambers (1997) argues that it is important to have continuous dialogue, gained from visiting communities, to understand issues and patterns of life and to assimilate with the local context to appreciate the conditions of their clients and from these to adopt appropriate mechanisms acceptable by both parties to promote and report on developmental issues.

Finally, lack of consistency and openness with clients in development often lead to misunderstanding between development professionals and their clients. As suggested by Dudley (1993) the policy of the development

professional's organisation may demand the emancipation of women while insisting on respect for traditional cultural norms and institutions at the community level. An organisation that preaches one thing to its clients but practises another thing (unclear agenda, non-participatory programme design and implementation) does not command respect and is prone to promote misunderstanding between itself and its clients.

Hence to make this misunderstanding less likely the dealings of a development professional with clients should reflect his or her organisation's organisational philosophy (Eade, 2003). In addition scholars such as Chambers (1997), Eade et al (1995), and Simon et al (1999) among others are stressing the need for development professionals to establish trust with their clients by being open about their purpose, criteria for funding and methods; what they seek to do, why and how. Where there are differences of analysis, or conflicts of interest, these need to be addressed as frankly as possible. Clients of development projects should always be consulted and properly advised on projects especially when co-funding exists for them to understand the implications involved; for example reporting, beneficiaries, duration of projects and agreement on acceptable arrangements. They argue further that those field staff or development practitioners who are inadequately informed cannot be fully accountable to the wide range of people with whom they have to work. Therefore the professionals need to be fully trained to handle such issues.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, one can argue that misunderstandings between development professionals and their clients is inevitable because of varied issues associated with communication and development. As Dudley (1993) argues, development is not just about increased wealth. It means change; changes in behaviour, aspirations, and in the way in which one understands the world. This means that it is imperative to understand how and why people change in order to ensure that they can benefit from large-scale aid and policies. This can be achieved only through effective communication between the sender and receiver whereby the sender understands the issues to be communicated and also understands the background, context, culture, belief systems and knowledge levels of the receiver (Mody, 1991). These issues therefore need to be considered so that poor communication between professionals and their clients does not hinder sustainable development taking place.

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