

How implementing communication rights might contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals

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Introduction

Communication lies at the heart of social change. Living together in peace, advancing sustainable development, harnessing today's technologies for good, and living one's faith all demand communication that creates community, strengthens participation, increases freedoms, develops cultures, and is a voice for justice.

The democratization of communication was one of the great challenges of the last three decades. That situation has not changed. Despite new international covenants (such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), despite new legislation (such as national laws on the right to information), government and corporate interests, concentration of media ownership, political and commercial restrictions on using the Internet, all continue to impede or censor communication today.

Independent access to the word, to the image, to new information and communication technologies is a key demand of groups in civil society that understand the need to contest a social agenda largely controlled by politics and corporate commerce. They want to participate actively in shaping public opinion and in determining their own future.

A good example of blocking communication comes from the Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen at the end of 2009, where Indigenous Peoples were shut out of the talks. On Human Rights Day, December 10, 2009 the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) released a statement condemning their exclusion:

“Although we are the most affected by climate change, our voices, our propositions on the various negotiating texts are currently being ignored because not only are we kept outside the room but no one is listening to the cries and suffering of our peoples.”

Cutting off access to communication (covert censorship) is often a problem that affects people in the global South, but also in Eastern and Western Europe, Canada and the U.S.A. AT&T, the telecommunications giant based in San Antonio, Texas, wanted to become a video provider, but without having to bargain with local municipalities like the cable companies had to do. To achieve its goal, AT&T successfully lobbied to create a state-wide franchise system – bypassing the tradition of working closely with local communities to assess their information and communication needs.

Texas became Ground Zero for a wave of telecommunications deregulation that has since swept the USA. Although AT&T and other phone companies spearheaded this movement, the cable industry quickly saw an advantage to ending their longstanding municipal arrangements as well. So, today there are 20 States where local municipal control over cable and video franchises has been stripped away

A second example comes from Canada. In 2008 WACC took part in a research project with Simon Fraser University and OpenMedia.ca. It was funded by the Social Sciences Research Council.¹ The report has been published and among its many findings – which are of great concern to Canadians – was that during the past ten years, community broadcasting is no longer mandatory but optional. And cable companies have “professionalized” those channels that are still available to give them a competitive advantage rather than maintain

their integrity as a community resource. The result is that fewer than 10% of Canadians can access a “community channel” to express their views or make a programme.

Inclusion vs. exclusion

In theory, the technological revolution and digitization has enabled communities and social groups to set up their own radio and television stations, telecommunication centres, and virtual networks to communicate in their own words and images. Such efforts help strengthen freedom of expression and contribute a diversity of voices to the way society is organized. They are indispensable to claiming and defending the rights of citizens, to health campaigns, to informal education processes, and to preserving what might be described as the world’s “cultural biodiversity”.

But that is not the whole story. There is a need to promote access to new communication technologies as pluralistic spaces that facilitate intercultural and interfaith dialogue. There is a need to strengthen communication capacities that enable people to have an influence on decision-making at all levels of policy-making. Today’s most urgent issues need communication: poverty alleviation, food and water security, violence against women, forced migration, and the rights of children. Who is listening to or can even hear the voices of those most affected?

What are communication rights all about?

Communication rights allow people to assert different points of view and to articulate different social or cultural identities. Communication rights, therefore, are a matter of justice, equality, and solidarity.

In particular, communication rights empower marginalised people – women, refugees, displaced persons, migrant workers, people with disabilities, the poor and dispossessed. Communication rights enable them to express their hopes and needs in a manner and at a time of their own choosing.

Communication rights have social, political and cultural dimensions. They encompass freedom of expression, media democracy, cultural diversity, and access to information and knowledge. They include linguistic rights (e.g. the right to use, teach, and preserve one’s mother tongue). Language enables dialogue; dialogue enables understanding; understanding enables peaceful coexistence. At least, that’s the mantra. But how can you dialogue when your language is threatened by a law limiting the use of your mother tongue?

In September 2009, ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia were confronted by a new law limiting the use of minority languages. It says that Slovak must be used in all “official contacts”, including the police, armed forces, fire brigade, postal services and local government. But “official contacts” are not clearly defined and could include cultural events and live reporting in minority languages on television and radio. Many of the half a million Hungarians living in Slovakia regard the new law as the latest in a series of moves undermining their culture.

Governments, non-governmental organisations and social movements – and these, of course, include people of faith – can work together to put communication rights into practice.

- Firstly, governments, media professionals and social actors must guarantee the communication and information rights of individuals and communities.
- Secondly, ordinary people must have equitable access to communication in order to express their political, economic, social, cultural and religious concerns.
- Thirdly, those responsible for the mass media must actively sustain their public service role as critical monitors of government and society.

People have long talked of the rise of “information societies”. In fact, if we are to avoid social exclusion, we need to speak of information and knowledge *sharing* societies.

Information and knowledge sharing societies

In 2003 the first phase of a global event called the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) took place in Geneva. A second phase followed in 2005 in Tunisia. In Geneva, representatives of civil society groups put forward the view that there is no single communication or knowledge society. Instead, different kinds of information societies exist at local, national and global levels and it is people – not governments or the commercial sector – who make up and shape these “information and communication societies”.

The Civil Society Declaration said:

“We are committed to building information and communication societies that are people-centred, inclusive and equitable. Societies in which everyone can freely create, access, utilise, share and disseminate information and knowledge, so that individuals, communities and peoples are empowered to improve their quality of life and to achieve their full potential.”²

Yet, despite considerable socio-economic development in many countries, the challenge remains of people who have little or no access to information and communication technologies. They include the majority in sub-Saharan Africa, and the poor and marginalized in large parts of Asia and Latin America. It may come as a surprise to learn that lack of access is also an issue in the affluent North – for example, people in the USA and Europe whom the technological revolution has bypassed.

The European Commission has an Information Society Portal.³ Promoting an e-inclusive society, it identifies the most excluded groups in Europe as the elderly, the unemployed and those with a low level of education. In addition, only 3% of public web sites fully comply with web accessibility standards, creating additional hurdles for the 15% of the EU population with disabilities.

In the global South, lack of access and the “digital divide” raise political and economic questions. Should a country that faces major problems of poverty invest in urban telecommunications infrastructures – the benefits of which are bound to favour multinational and powerful business interests? Or should priority be given to low cost information backbones that can service a range of appropriate information and communication technologies (ICTs)? Who is to pay for such investment particularly when it produces social rather than economic returns?

And what of young people, of whom the Civil Society Declaration at the World Summit on the Information Society noted:

“They must be empowered as learners, developers, contributors, entrepreneurs and decision-makers... In particular we must seek to assist and empower youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially young people from developing countries. Equality of opportunity for girls and young women must be integral to our efforts and we must create a greater awareness of their specific needs and potential in the field of ICTs.”

What are the implications of all this for religious communicators who often have local and national platforms for social dialogue? They are in a position to communicate a vision of a better world and to exercise a prophetic role in challenging the inequalities of a communications system whose values are political or economic rather than at the service of social justice and human dignity.

What have communication rights to do with the Millennium Development Goals?

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a set of targets to reduce global poverty and to improve living standards by 2015. They were adopted by 191 UN Member States in 2000 and have become a generally accepted framework for developing countries and their partners to work together in pursuit of a better future for all.

If that sounds too far-fetched, here is some cold water thrown on the idea by Egyptian economist Samir Amin, director of Third World Forum:

“A critical examination of the formulation of the goals as well as the definition of the means that would be required to implement them can only lead to the conclusion that the MDGs cannot be taken seriously... Should the exercise not be described as pure hypocrisy, as pulling the wool over the eyes of those who are being forced to accept the dictates of liberalism in the service of the quite particular and exclusive interests of dominant globalized capital?”⁴

Nevertheless, the MDGs are being taken seriously by many governmental and non-governmental agencies. Considerable public resources are being applied to achieving them and – therefore – we need to look at the role that communication rights might play in facilitating their achievement. There are eight goals, whose current progress is indicated in the Millennium Development Goals Report 2009.

1. Poverty and hunger: Between 1990 and 2015, halve the number of people living on less than \$1 a day. Globally, the target of reducing the poverty rate by half by 2015 seems likely to be achieved. However, some regions will fall far short, and as many as 1 billion people are likely to remain in extreme poverty by the target date.

Globally, the proportion of children under five who are underweight declined by one fifth over the period 1990-2005. Eastern Asia showed the greatest improvement and is surpassing the MDG target, largely due to nutritional advances in China. Western Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean have also demonstrated significant progress, with underweight prevalence dropping by more than one third. The greatest proportions of children going hungry continue to be found in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. If current trends continue, the world will miss the 2015 target by 30 million children, essentially robbing them of their full potential.

2. Education: Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. The number of children of primary school age who are out of school has dropped by 33 million since 1999. Still, 72 million children worldwide were denied the right to education in 2007. Almost half of these children live in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by Southern Asia, home to 18 million out-of school children. According to partial projections by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report, at least 29 million children will still be out of school in 2015.

3. Promote gender equality and empower women: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015. The world continues to progress towards gender parity in education as measured by the ratio of girls' to boys' gross enrolment. In the developing regions as a whole, 95 girls were enrolled in primary school for every 100 boys in 2007, compared to 91 in 1999. However, the target of eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 was missed. Ensuring that the opportunity is not lost again in 2015 will require renewed urgency and commitment.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that, in December 2008, there were 12.8 per cent more unemployed men and 6.7 per cent more unemployed women in the world than in December 2007. This suggests that, after the initial shock in male-dominated industries, the financial crisis is now hitting female-dominated industries and services and may affect women more profoundly over the long term.

Worldwide, women are entering a greater variety of political leadership positions. As of January 2009, women reached the highest parliamentary position — presiding officer — in 31 parliamentary chambers. This figure has remained more or less constant for the past decade. During 2008, a woman took up the post of speaker for the first time in Pakistan, Romania, Rwanda, Serbia and Uzbekistan. There were 15 women serving as heads of state or government in March 2009.

4. *Child mortality: Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.* Deaths in children under five have declined steadily worldwide. In 2007, the global under-five mortality rate was 67 deaths per 1,000 live births, down from 93 in 1990. That year, more than 12.6 million young children died from largely preventable or treatable causes; the figure has declined to around 9 million today, despite population growth.

5. *Maternal health: Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality rate.* Every year, more than half a million women and girls die as a result of complications during pregnancy, childbirth or the six weeks following delivery. Ninety-nine percent of these deaths occur in developing countries. Maternal mortality is among the health indicators that show the greatest gap between rich and poor — both between countries and within them. Developed regions report nine maternal deaths per 100,000 live births compared to 450 maternal deaths in developing regions, where 14 countries have maternal mortality ratios of at least 1,000 per 100,000 live births. Half of all maternal deaths (265,000) occur in sub-Saharan Africa and another third (187,000) in Southern Asia. Together, these two regions account for 85% of all maternal deaths.

6. *Combat disease: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.* Worldwide, the number of people newly infected with HIV peaked in 1996 and has since declined, to 2.7 million in 2007. These positive trends are mostly due to a fall in the annual number of new infections in some countries in Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile, infection rates continue to rise in other parts of the world, especially Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In those regions, HIV prevalence has almost doubled since 2001 and the number of people living with HIV has increased from 630,000 to 1.6 million.

Major progress has been made in the fight against malaria in recent years, due in large part to increased funding and focus on malaria control. New and ambitious goals, laid out in the 2008 Roll Back Malaria Global Action Plan, are challenging countries to implement bold plans to achieve universal coverage with key interventions by 2010.

7. *Ensure environmental sustainability: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources; by 2015 halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation; by 2020 to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers.*

The continued growth of global emissions confirms that combating climate change must remain a priority for the world community. Achieving a substantive breakthrough in the next round of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations, slated for Mexico is extremely important in that regard. It will also be important to demonstrate that the world can handle the climate change problem even in the midst of a global economic downturn and seize new opportunities for “green” growth.

The world is ahead of schedule in meeting the 2015 drinking water target. Yet a number of countries face an uphill battle: 884 million people worldwide still rely on unimproved water sources for their drinking, cooking, bathing and other domestic activities. Of these, 84 per cent (746 million people) live in rural areas.

The lives of slum dwellers have improved in almost all regions. In Eastern Asia, the sharp reduction in the proportion of slum dwellers is largely due to increased use of improved water supplies and sanitation in China. Similarly, expanded access to water and sanitation in India has lifted progress in the Southern Asia region as a whole. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest prevalence of slums, where the living conditions among impoverished populations are severe, often involving multiple deprivations.

8. *Global partnership: There are six targets related to special needs, non-discriminatory trading and financial systems, debt reduction, strategies for decent and productive work for youth, access to affordable essential drugs, and making available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications, all aimed at finding a combined global strategy to fight poverty.*

Net disbursements of official development assistance (ODA) in 2008 increased 10.2% to \$119.8 billion, the highest dollar figure ever recorded. Expenditures on bilateral aid programmes and projects have been on the rise in recent years and increased 12.5% in real terms between 2007 and 2008 — an indication that donors are scaling up their core aid programmes. That said, total aid remains well below the United Nations target of 0.7% of gross national income.

Mobile phones and advances in communication technology are bringing new opportunities for development. More than one fifth of the world's population are now online, but the majority are in developed countries.

The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009 is detailed and – to a certain extent – partisan. However, more than halfway to the 2015 deadline, major advances in the fight against poverty and hunger have begun to slow or even reverse as a result of the global economic and food crises. Despite many successes, overall progress has been too slow for most of the targets to be met by 2015.

Communication Rights are Human Rights

Whatever one thinks of the Millennium Development Goals, providing access to information and knowledge helps address issues related to poverty, education, health, politics, and environment. Policies in these sectors are complex, but implementing communication rights is clearly crucial from the perspective of sustainable development. Increasing public awareness and generating wider debate about communication rights would be important steps towards overcoming inertia and gaining momentum for the MDGs.

Communication rights affirm that people have the right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. Effective implementation of the principle of participation is a vital component of creating policies that are legitimate and aimed at overcoming social exclusion. The principles of communication rights determine who is participating (included or excluded) and which 'voices' are listened to when decisions are being made.

We have already seen that people have a right to essential information on matters that concern them. The right to information underpins demands for transparent decision-making and public disclosure of information. It is also a vital element of accountability, since governments, public officials, international and national development agencies cannot be held responsible for acts and decisions that remain undisclosed.

In practical terms, and in direct relation to the MDGs, recognizing, implementing, and building on communication rights will help create "enabling environments" in which structural, political, economic, and cultural obstacles to social change can be identified, analyzed, and action taken to overcome them.

The aim is to empower people to act collectively and effectively. Many of you will have known or heard of Michael Traber, former director of WACC's Global Studies Programme and editor of its international quarterly journal *Media Development*. He once wrote that:

"Society and its institutions must enable the active participation of all in the economic, political and cultural life of the community. This is not a high-minded expression of benevolence, but a demand of justice... The participation meant here is public dialogue about the public good. Its aim is to contribute to the debate about society, its values and priorities, and, above all, our common future. It's a dynamic and ongoing process, aimed at change and transformation."⁵

Elsewhere, I have advanced a theology of communication rights allied to a preferential option for the poor.⁶ It goes some way towards answering a question posed by Dom Helder Câmara, champion of Brazil's downtrodden, who asked: "When shall we have the courage to outgrow the charity mentality and see that at the bottom of all relations between rich and poor there is a problem of *justice*?"

Unless we work to *interpret* and *communicate* the structures and inadequacies that enable oppression to persist, and unless we take action to change them, we are complicit with injustice. The words of Martin Luther King serve as a warning:

“On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”⁷

Communicators have a significant role to play in that restructuring and in helping to empower people and communities. Access to relevant information, knowledge and tools will increase people’s capacity to achieve development goals, strengthen networking, and enhance the cross-fertilization that comes from multiple sources of information and knowledge.

In particular, communicators – including those from faith communities – can help in three key ways. They can:

- Provide increased space for and attention to the voices, perspectives, and contributions of those most affected by poverty and other development issues;
- Improve understanding of the world’s cultural diversity; significantly expand public debate and dialogue on the issues that are a priority in international, national, and local contexts;
- Advocate more open, participatory, and inclusive processes of policy development that emphasize the perspectives of those most affected by poverty and the absence of social justice.

Finally, a United Nations High-level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals will take place 20-22 September 2010 in New York.⁸ The primary objective is to accelerate progress towards all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. The MDGs Summit is expected to undertake a comprehensive review of successes, best practices and lessons learned, obstacles and gaps, challenges and opportunities, leading to concrete strategies for action. Of particular relevance to civil society organisations are the Hearings of the General Assembly – a part of the official process – that will be convened by June 2010 in New York.

Notes

1. See <http://centreforcommunicationrights.org/news/41-latest/438-research-shows-that-civil-society-in-canada-supports-media-reform.html>
2. See <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>
3. http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/tl/soccul/eincl/index_en.htm
4. Amin, Samir (2006). The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South. *Monthly Review*, Vol. 57, No. 10, March. <http://monthlyreview.org/0306amin.php>
5. Traber, Michael (2008). “Communication is Inscribed in Human Nature: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Right to Communicate.” In Philip Lee (Ed.) *Communicating Peace: Entertaining Angels Unawares*, (p. 254). Southbound, Penang.
6. Lee, Philip (2009). “Towards a Theology of Communication Rights.” In *Fieldwork in Religion*, 4.2 (2009) 191-207.
7. Speech “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” New York City, 4 April 1967.
8. See: <http://www.endpoverty2015.org/>