

# Action Research, Participatory Communication: Why Governments Don't Listen

By Keyan G Tomaselli

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## Introduction to this issue

Participatory action research and participatory communication practices, like the notion of development support communication, are not new to African scholars (Servaes et al 1996; White et al 1994). Most African university departments of communication, in fact, emphasise the latter, and work closely with educators on distance-learning applications (Ansu-Kyermeah 1991, 1994). This development emphasis, no doubt, reflects something of the more populous rural areas of most African countries in comparison to the First and Second Worlds. It is also indicative of an urgent need to deal with the consequences of underdevelopment and to involve citizens in meaningful interactions with message makers and governments (Legakane 1997; Kasongo 1996).

The extraordinary fact, as all those working within the broader 'participatory' paradigm well know, is the short shrift given these scholar-practitioners by government departments and economists, the corporate media industries and even educators

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themselves. Academics are snidely told to get into the 'real' world, that they are living in 'ivory towers', and that they have no idea of anything beyond book learning. Frustration, irritation and finally alienation set in, as academics predict failure upon failure of top-down projects which fail to "take culture into account" in policy-making and management (Klitgaard 1993:49).

My own experience as the 'media expert' on the South African Department of Health's Advisory Committee on AIDS and STDs has followed this depressing progression from an initial sense of positive participation, to alienation. This occurred as bureaucrats, and even sectors of the medical fraternity, seemed unable to understand that top-down message-imposition with regard to health and life skills issues largely correlates with audience alienation. The recipients have little or no sense of ownership of the messages. They therefore do not see the problem relating to them, because there are few points of reference to their actual experience. This enddistancing of target groups from messages intended to be life-supporting and life-enhancing contributes to communication failure, no matter how big the budget or how professional the communications agency implementing the campaign.

Politicians seem to have little or no idea of communication strategy or accountability for communications. High profile projects imposed on campaigns without reference to target audiences, audience profiles and cultural differences, message integration and conceptual coherence, are quick fixes to the longer-term and much more focused grassroots learning brought about by participatory practices. Quick fixes also provide a spurious and temporary reassurance to bureaucrats that 'they are doing something'. The sub-text, of course, is they want to be 'seen' by their voters as doing something 'positive' and immediate - irrespective of evidence which discredits the quick fix approaches - especially where medium-to-longer term strategies are required. Panic substitutes for strategy; confusion gets in the way of clarity, and messages are often constructed without



reference to those to whom the messages are supposed to be speaking (see, eg., Parkie on problems of billboard communication). And, the HIV epidemic continues irrespective of all this glossy, high profile politically self-serving media. As academic economist and advisor Robert Klitgaard (1992:49) reiterates: "The failures of 'development' ... have spawned a series of calls to take African cultures more fully into account".

What are these African cultures, and how can they be mobilised and incorporated into forms of expression which mesh indigenous and trans-cultural ways of making meaning and making sense? How can this be done in terms of contexts which mobilise indigenous values and knowledge? This is the thrust of Donald Guambe and Arnold Shepperson's study in this volume. Their reconstitution of cultural policy concepts in the African context is intended to theoretically frame the more communication-focused papers which follow. The contradiction, however, is that banks and other lending bodies, government and development agencies, experts both local and imported, tend to impose unreconstituted First World theories on Third World contexts regardless of their applicability.

The studies in this volume all, in their own way, address Klitgaard's question. While this work is less policy related than Klitgaard's own paper, the authors published here discuss problems of communication and education within South African, Zimbabwean, Botswanan, Malawian and Zambian contexts. These studies are based on extensive field experience, working with known real people, with known real needs, at the coalface, as it were. These authors have cut their teeth in the mud and the wind, the heat and the humidity, and the poverty and the optimism of rural and urban African communities. They might be employed by the 'ivory tower' but their vocations are geared to putting theory into practice, to effect real change in the face of structural forces far more powerful than all the participatory projects put together.

Theatre, action research, print and related forms of subject-generated expression and messages are argued to be much more effective in changing social attitudes amongst specific communities and groups than is the much more expensive, glossy, and audience-remote messages of the mass media which fail to link to delivery of services, and which assume that all citizens make sense of messages uniformly - the discredited assumptions derived by human communication scholars from the Shannon and Weaver (1949) model.

As Felix Fandyroy Moyo argues, drama has the ability to remove the "stigma of 'mass' from the concept of communication", and thus to reorientate it from "organised manipulation" to "spontaneous, natural interaction". Such grassroots' communication is also less likely to be hijacked for political ends by national politicians who have little contact with living conditions on the ground. (Kerr, however, still warns of this possibility.)

The explanation by Lynn Dalrymple of a Drama in Aids Education DramAidE) project, for example, reveals some extraordinary shifts in Zulu female gender identity which is indicated by a lessening regressive patriarchy. This trend is linked to the broader political processes set in motion by the onset of the 'new' South Africa. DramAidE methodology arose from a critique by Dalrymple (1987) in her doctoral thesis of received Western notions of 'theatre' and their incoherence in a rural African situation. Her alternative notion of 'community theatre' offered one way of identifying and then animating "African cultures" in health and life skills education.

Action media research where target groups design their own messages, facilitated by a media professional, is described by Warren Parker (1994), who developed the early Department of Health AIDS media campaign. Drawing on his MA thesis, here again like Dalrymple, Parker is an academic-practitioner whose extensive degree research this time became the backbone of a national AIDS media programme drawn from working with the



potential beneficiaries within civil society and health NGOs. Unlike the DramAidE project, Parker's recommendations, which had the backing of a National AIDS Media Forum, largely failed coherent implementation. The government preferred to waste most of the 1995 budget on a high profile play, **Sarafina 2** which not only accomplished nothing in media terms, but also miscommunicated information about AIDS, resultantly prejudicial to those not infected as well as misinforming people with AIDS about their condition. **Sarafina 2** was seen by perhaps several thousand spectators; DramAidE has actively involved millions of **participants** at a fraction of the cost of the Mbongeni Ngema extravaganza. **Sarafina 2** is an example of a top down, linear anti-communication. David Kerr might locate this performative intervention in terms of what he calls the crudest theories of cultural forms. These, he argues, provide attractive entertainment which can sugar the didactic pill of the developmental message.

The above comments may make for depressing reading. Indeed, Kerr even anticipates this negative effect on readers of his article. But he also provides some guidelines on how to deal with the problem. Society and praxis-oriented academics have appropriate theories and techniques, methods and experience, evidence and policy, but governments are reluctant to apply proven projects systematically on broader scales. This is partly because the Shannon and Weaver model of communication has such a universal toehold on conventional thinking; and partly because grassroots projects lack political glamour. Prejudice against small-scale activities not properly understood by quick fix proponents contributes to the uphill struggles of participatory communication and development workers.

In more sophisticated communication models, Kerr points out, cultural forms provide communication channels by which subaltern communities are able to negotiate change with those institutions attempting to bring about innovations in society.

The DramAidE project offers one such success story, as Dalrymple explains in her article. This is the upside of Kerr's rather pessimistic experience in other parts of Southern Africa. DramAidE's relationship with the provincial government and its politicians has been unusual and productive. The project was initiated by the former KwaZulu Department of Health and went nationwide in 1996. In KwaZulu-Natal, DramAidE negotiated civil war, contexts of sexual violence in which HIV is spread, and it also mobilised both contemporary and traditional ritual and cultural forms to involve participants in the development of both messages and behavioural strategies to address HIV and STD infection. From this narrow focus it has broadened into a life skills emphasis.

Notwithstanding some scepticism, DramAidE is now national, and tracking studies by interdisciplinary teams including anthropologists, medical practitioners, statisticians, psychologists, AIDS researchers, and other social scientists, have built up a comprehensive body of knowledge where participatory action research links with participatory communication practices and health issues. Similarly, the 1997 national AIDS media plan for South Africa which emphasises an integration between big and small media and participatory practices and messages linked to health delivery, and in which programmes like DramAidE and the kind of work being done by Parker, Kerr and Moyo are assumed to have key roles, is finally getting the attention it deserves from the AIDS Directorate of the Department of Health, though implementation of the participatory philosophy continues to be buffeted by short-term, politically expedient and often counter-communication applications. Democratising communication practices is as much part of the struggle as is 'the struggle' itself.

Development projects across the African continent are caught between the contradictions of impatient urban elites looking for rapid embourgeoisification and the bulk of the rural poor who make



out as best they can, sometimes with the help of local NGOs, some of which are committed to the principal of participation and some not, as Kerr argues. These are the real success stories and and the ones discussed by our authors. This issue of *Africa Media Review* thus examines both the problems and projects of participatory action research and how governments can aid or impede such programmes.

The four papers published here are drawn from the DESCOM (Development Support Communication) project, initiated by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Pretoria, South Africa (Nyamnjoh 1997). The papers were originally presented at the HSRC's 1996 Culture, Communication, Development Symposium co-organised with UNESCO, the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies, University of Natal, and the Department of Communication, University of South Africa. DESCOM is an attempt to put theory into practice, to rethink the notions of 'arts' and 'culture' in developmental contexts, and to re-energize moribund theories of development in terms of the beneficiaries, and what sense **they** make of development and health programmes, how **they** articulate and define their needs and the solutions **they** develop to achieve them.

Drama could easily become part of development studies courses and this is indeed the case where many African drama and communication departments are concerned. But the caveat, as Klitgaard, a hard-nosed development economic reminds us, is in the requirement that we know about culture. Regrettably, few economists really care.

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