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Positioning Communication in Agricultural Development Projects: Lessons from Timor-Leste

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Abstract: Despite a wealth of increasingly sophisticated research into the best ways of communicating new agricultural technologies in developing countries, too little of this actually informs what is undertaken at the practical level. The technical preoccupations of program planners and researchers often divert critical attention from what both groups can regard as the "soft" challenge of communicating innovations. When communication professionals are employed, their skills and insights can be overlooked and their role restricted to producing output-driven (rather than impact-led) communication initiatives. This can result in lower than expected adoption rates for new technologies particularly in farming communities where traditional notions about agriculture are strongly held, rates of adult illiteracy are high, and the reach of mass media is limited. In devising effective communication strategies to engage such communities, openness to new ideas is crucial to produce fit-for-purpose techniques that are culturally sensitive and appropriate to local drivers of behaviour change. But this requires the effective positioning of communication within a development project. How can that be done?

Key words: agricultural communication, communication for development, project planning, Timor-Leste

1. Introduction

Agricultural development projects often rely on local extension services to disseminate their messages and promote the adoption of new technologies. Often those services are not completely adequate to the task, however, requiring the project to employ additional communication approaches to connect with farming communities at scale.

A large body of research literature exists on what constitutes effective communication in development contexts but practically none on how best to position communication resources, and encourage appropriate communication tactics, within development projects. This may go some way to explaining the general consensus that communication for development is still under-achieving in terms of its hoped-for outcomes. The field of public relations has produced a good deal of literature on how to devise and implement communication strategies within organizations of a corporate or public affairs kind operating in developed world locations. Agricultural development projects, however, have their own particular characteristics which in many ways are polar opposites of these contexts. While this is not a study of how development projects are designed and managed, the characteristics of projects in both regards have a significant bearing on how communication activities are conceptualized for, and undertaken in, development projects.

A number of studies — regional and general — report a slowness to respond to opportunities to engage farmers through effective communication techniques with information that could improve their farm output [1-3]. Often, old and outmoded ideas continue to inform the planning and implementation of many development projects to the detriment of participatory approaches involving integral roles for

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communication professionals [4-6]. At the highest levels, as demonstrated by reports prepared by the FAO, USAID and the World Bank, a consensus may have formed around the importance of communication initiatives in rural development involving participatory approaches, employing two-way communication channels, and taking account of the psychological, cultural and social determinants of behaviour and how each can impede or encourage change [7, 8]. But how much of this is mere lip service and how much actually filters down to inform approaches on the ground is another question.

According to McAnany there is now widespread agreement that communication for development and social change will only move ahead if there is *better demonstration of success by projects*" [9]. But one ingredient of that success is the effective positioning of communication resources within projects to encourage a genuinely supportive culture for new forms of extension. This study looks at how that might be done.

2. Projects and Communication

Projects may be defined as organized activities for achieving development results that promote social and economic change in poor countries. Unlike development *programs*, the specific goals and purposes of projects are clearly (and narrowly) defined and projects operate within specific time periods under strictly limited budgets. Since the early 1950s projects have become the principal means of delivering financial resources for development from the developed to the less developed world. The attraction of projects stems, in part, from the uncertain political and administrative support often provided by recipient countries: unable to rely on a recipient to formulate and/or implement coherent development strategies of its own accord, the project fills the gap with well-defined planning and administrative procedures to channel development resources through particular tasks to specific groups of beneficiaries.

Another attraction of projects (for the donor) is that they constitute a limited and time-bounded financial commitment that is amenable to external monitoring and control [10]. In the words of Ika and Hodgson, the attraction of the project approach to development planners is the belief that international development (ID) "primarily poses a technical and managerial problem, and that rationally planned and controlled projects can provide the best structure and the most efficient means to deliver capital investment and thereby achieve ID goals and objectives" [11]. As will be seen, this kind of thinking can have a profound effect on the place communication is conceived to occupy in projects.

Given that ID projects are the most common instrument for the delivery of development aid, and thus responsible for tens of billions of dollars of that aid annually, it is surprising that so little literature in the field of project management has focused on them [12]. There has been little written about how project managers should manage ID projects or what makes for ID project success and thus little of such research contributing over the years to debates on the effectiveness of aid delivered in this way [13]. It follows that project management literature has also neglected to examine the more specific issue of communication management in ID projects. As Enghel argues, because communication typically has a subsidiary role in development projects, research and theorizing about the field has not led to the formulation and implementation of specific policy frameworks [14].

Put another way, we know very little about how the organizational and cultural characteristics of development projects impact on the way they understand, and undertake, communication initiatives.

The management of ID projects differs from (developed world) corporate and governmental management in a number of fundamental ways. Indeed, Ika and Saint-Macary argue that when "the world's richest countries, institutions and people meet

its poorest, the contract-based precepts and *modus operandi* of standard project management may become convenient myths at best" [15]. While this is an interesting contention in itself, of immediate concern is how the peculiar realities of ID projects pose specific challenges to conventional public relations approaches to devising communication strategies and activities. Several characteristics common to ID projects are notable in this regard.

The first concerns complexity or, more particularly, how complexity is addressed in ID project design. ID projects typically operate in socio-politically and culturally complex environments, often under pressure to pursue intangible (such as poverty alleviation) and conflicting (development versus improved living standards) objectives stemming from the variety of expectations held for them. The way projects negotiate this complexity is typically through a prescriptive approach relying on a logically arranged – and so often linear - sequence of activities determined by explicit objectives pursued by professional (that is skilled and rational) project managers [16]. What flows from this approach is a plan that "typically specifies objectives, targets to be reached, outputs to be produced, a predetermined timeframe, the level of resources required, and an implementation schedule; in short, a blueprint for the implementation of the design-in-advance solution to the problem identified" [17].

This approach poses two potential challenges for a project's communication activities: one is that these activities are often planned before the practical difficulties of implementing the activities are fully known; another is that communication is seen as little more than a service rendered at the end of a process line of activities when all the 'hard' work has been done. One of the common problems confronting agricultural development projects is the misplaced confidence project planners place in local extension services. When these prove unable to deliver what was expected of them, more and more unplanned — and often unbudgeted — work falls on project staff [18]. This creates particular problems where communication has been conceived from the beginning as little more than an add-on activity.

A second characteristic of ID projects that impinges on their approach to communication stems from the peculiar nature of their stakeholders. The least important of these are the actual intended beneficiaries of the project; the most important are the donors [12]. In the absence of a local constituency demanding results on its terms, project teams measure their results in terms set by outside donors and sponsors. These typically continue to take quantitative form via measures of productivity increases [19]. Adding to this approach is the pressure from donors to make continued funding contingent on the demonstration of pay-offs in objective measures [17]. Both of these influences can result in a tendency to view all of a project's operations in purely output terms –a particularly poor yard-stick when applied to communication initiatives.

A final characteristic of ID projects relevant to a consideration of communication involves their staffing, particularly in agricultural projects. The primary staff grouping in these agricultural development projects is often comprised of research scientists or technical advisers whose long and critical involvement in the project lends them considerable prestige within it. By contrast, staffs working on communication are often serving in a voluntary and/or temporary capacity, which encourages them to be viewed as individuals or groups having low prestige. Prestigious groups typically enjoy more authority and responsibility than low prestige groups [20]. The members of a prestigious group can use their positions to ignore the advice of other groups or to seek to control all the activities of the project even if they lack expertise and experience beyond their particular narrow field. Controlling communication activities (often showcasing results as the chief priority) is one such temptation.

3. About This study

The present study was undertaken in connection with a largely Australian government-funded agricultural development project (Seeds of Life or SoL) in Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste is situated at the eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago and occupies a total area about the size of Connecticut (approximately 15,000 square kilometres). Its population of 1.2 million is primarily dependent on subsistence agriculture which regularly falls short of producing enough food to meet even the basic food needs of many Timorese [21]. SoL began in 2000 as a research project investigating what higher yielding varieties of subsistence crops were suitable to cultivate under Timorese conditions. For a decade, this kind of research dominated its operations. Toward the end of 2011, however, SoL entered a five year largely extension phase promoting the adoption of successful varieties together with appropriate agronomic practices to maximize their yield. This transition from research to extension created a key role for communication.

The research reported here comprised a longitudinal study to examine the experiences of communication staff through the life of this extension phase. The study sought to uncover staff members' perceptions of what it was like to work with technical advisers and researchers; identify what, if any, disagreements arose over communication priorities, approaches, or techniques between communication staff and technical advisers, and; determine the extent to which communication staff felt accepted within the project as professionals in their own right with valuable skills to contribute to the project's success. On the basis of those findings, the study also sought to explore how best communication might be positioned within similar projects.

It should be noted that a Program Design Document (PDD) had been prepared for SoL in 2010. This document identified the communication objectives of the project which it saw being pursued by using mass media channels in conjunction with Timor-Leste's Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries' (MAF) agricultural information unit. The PDD also required a draft communication strategy to be written for the program before it commenced and I was commissioned to prepare this document in late 2011. The PDD itself made no allowance for dedicated communication staff to be employed by SoL and provided only a small budget for communication-related activities over the life of the project [22].

4. Methodology

The most appropriate way to undertake a study of this kind was by interviewing relevant SoL staff directly during annual field trips I undertook to Timor-Leste, beginning in 2012. Interview research was supplemented by my observing the conditions under which SoL staff members went about their work, examining and discussing with communication staff the initiatives and materials they were working on, and maintaining regular correspondence with particular staff within SoL when I was not in Timor-Leste.

SoL's head office, which was located in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries compound in Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, comprised a relatively small group of people. In 2012 the office numbered 30 individuals together with three regional advisers who were formally attached to head office but who worked primarily outside of Dili. Of the 30 staff members, seven were technical advisers/research scientists and three were communication staff. Other full-time staff members were responsible for a range of activities: there was an office manager, a logistics manager, several administrative staff, an IT officer, a training coordinator, finance officers, a translator and a teacher of mathematics. These ancillary staff members were not considered relevant to my research as their roles and responsibilities did not touch on communication.

Overall staff numbers remained reasonably consistent over the course of the next four years although communication staff turn-over was high. By the end of 2015, SoL employed 28 staff, including five technical advisers and one communication coordinator, at head office. At times it had also taken on volunteers/interns who were not counted formally as SoL staff: two such were assisting with communication initiatives in 2013-14 and their views were considered relevant to this research.

Between August 2012 and August 2015 I conducted 19 interviews with 11 staff members and the two volunteers/interns working in communication. Eight interviews were conducted with senior staff (one in 2012, two in 2013, three in 2014 and two in 2015) in order to get their perspectives on communication and working with communication staff. The remainder of the interviews were undertaken with communication staff (four in 2012, two in 2013, three in 2014 and two in 2015). Some interviews were conducted with the same people at different times in order to gauge if and how attitudes had changed.

5. Approach

The majority of interviews were conducted at SoL's head office although three needed to be conducted at an outside location (restaurant or hotel foyer) because the work commitments of the interviewees precluded them being interviewed in office hours. Of the 11 staff interviewed, six had English as a first language. The other interviewees were fluent in English: two were Dutch — one having studied at post-graduate level in Australia — one was Nepalese — having studied at post-graduate level in the UK — and two were Timorese — both having studied at university level in Australia.

Interviews typically were in-depth (lasting up to 60 minutes) but semi-structured. The intention was to enter into a relaxed conversation with the interviewee that would allow him or her to offer their own particular perspective on SoL's communication activities and emphasize their own challenges and concerns. Rather than using formal questions with pre-determined emphases, the intention behind this approach was to generate a more authentic picture of how communication was being undertaken in and by SoL and how communication staff felt about it. All interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by the author. Only interviews relevant to this particular article are referred to in what follows and interview numbers indicate the order in which a particular interview was undertaken from the total of 19 interviews.

6. Results

6.1 Workload

Over the course of the five-year project life of SoL one consistent comment made by communication staff referred to the sheer volume of work that was being directed their way. One early communication staffer (eventually appointed at the start of the project) reported in August 2012 that, even with the addition of another two communication staff to assist with communication work within months of the project start, the three of them "really cannot fill the demand within the office" (Author interview 2, August 2012). Another of the three commented at the time that the amount of work they were expected to do "was huge" (Author interview 3, August 2012). Towards the end of the project, another communication staffer reported little let-up in the work demands: "Seeds of Life is so big, and we've got our fingers in so many pies now…the biggest challenge comes down to there's so much happening — where do we focus our attention?" (Author interview 14, August 2014). The heavy workload was a function of the poor prioritising of communication in SoL's Program Design Document together with project designers' unrealistic assumptions about MAF's ability to play a major role in providing communication support. What the heavy workload meant was that there was little time to think through the design of communication initiatives and

even less to explore ways of filling gaps in approaches in order to better connect with remote farming communities.

That said, the interviews suggest that there were two distinct periods in the experience of communication staff. The first period lasted roughly twelve months and was characterized by frustration among communication staff at what they were being asked to do and a degree of tension between them and researchers/technical advisers arising from the way in which they were being asked to do it. In the second period, roughly 2013 to the end of the project, communication staff reported that they had garnered a degree of acceptance within the project ("respect" was a word they began to use) and were being consulted more often about the activities and materials they were responsible for delivering.

6.2 The Disciplinary Divide

Assumptions and perceptions arising from different disciplinary fields can generate disagreements, even tensions, about how project work should be undertaken. The transition from a research to an extension focus brought these tensions into stark relief in the early stages of the SoL project. One senior staff member acknowledged that there is a perception among people who have worked in agricultural development for a long period of time that they understand farmers and can communicate with them quite well. But given the key role of communication in the work SoL was now undertaking, new thinking was called for:

> As we move from research into extension, the ball game changes and I think we're still getting our minds around that…. If we'd been smart, we might have called it extension at the beginning and it would have fitted more in with the general jargon of the agricultural crowd (Author interview 1, August 2012).

A clash of disciplinary cultures around what constituted effective communication arose early between research/technical advisers and their communication colleagues. One of the later understood his role to be primarily concerned with delivering effective messages to farmers through appropriate channels. Instead he found the perception in the office to be quite different:

> The office is expecting an out-put driven approach. That's not what I have as a communications person. I normally work to have impact rather than output….To tell the office we needed to communicate the work we do [in] a language an ordinary farmer would understand was difficult for the researchers in the office to understand: they thought that the language they had been using was fine. So basically it was a typical situation of a researcher or a scientist thinking that his or her language is understandable to the world, whereas as a communications person I don't look at it that way (Author interview 2, August 2012).

One of the issues communication staff had to contend with in the first twelve months of the project was a perception that their professional skills were not understood and hence not valued by researchers and technical advisers. According to one communication staff member his inability to meet expectations in terms of delivering leaflets and posters "contributed to not getting much respect" in the office (Author interview 2, August 2012). More generally, he found it difficult to work with researchers on a professional as distinct from a personal basis. The problem, he said, stemmed from different ways of looking at the same phenomena: a researcher looked at a harvest, for instance, in technical terms of yield and so forth whereas a communication professional looked at it in human terms such as arose from the success or failure of the crop. It was very difficult for people from the two disciplinary fields to meet on common ground.

Another communication staff member felt that the more technically-inclined staff generally lacked an understanding of effective communication: when their messages failed to have the desired impact in terms of awareness or behavior change among farmers, there was a tendency to blame communication staff. As a result, approaches suggested by communication staff

tended to be further dismissed by other staff members. According to this interviewee the technical people never reflected on their own contribution in creating problems with the dissemination of information. He felt this was a lack of understanding on their part "but also a lack of interest in understanding what communication is all about". Theirs was "a strong focus on content and very little focus on how that content is being communicated" (Author interview 5, August 2012).

A communication staff member who became heavily involved in design work for SoL said he found the early brochures and leaflets produced by the project had been poorly done with far too much text (a high proportion of Timorese, particularly in remote farming communities, are illiterate), stretched logos, and poor resolution. Most printed materials were based on templates available free-of-charge on the web. Little thought had been given to the basic role of design:

> With graphic design like any other form of communication, you're trying to sell a message to people, to provide a message, and you can do that by creating an emotion, a feeling, using the design, and these [early examples] just look and feel dirty. (Author interview 3, August 2012).

Dealing with research staff and technical advisers to improve the quality of printed materials, however, was not easy. Some of the former appreciated the re-wording of leaflets and posters because they had too little time to do it themselves. Others, said a communication staff member, had "ridiculous" ideas. Some advisers would tell him that Timorese had no understanding of representation and so he couldn't use metaphors to convey information; others would say that photographs of anonymous farmers wouldn't work because they believed farmers couldn't relate to pictures unless they saw their own faces in them. At the same time, another communication staffer commented that most advisers never considered the role of colour in design even though colour was critically associated with Timorese values (Author interview 4, August 2012).

Two communication staffers worked on the redesign of one poster to improve its potential impact only to run into resistance from technical staff. The latter wanted changes back to what their instincts had initially suggested. This generated an annoying period for all concerned in which the poster had to be redesigned again and again. It was a slow process to break down the preference for heavy text-based information among researchers and technical advisers (Author interview 9, July 2013).

Generally, however, graphic design work was less confrontational than some of the other activities in which communication staff members were engaged. One such staffer pointed out the proprietorial attitudes research staff could adopt:

> When I started to get more involved in the other things like the [project's] website, that's when this problem [of respecting skills] started to emerge. There was a feeling about all those other areas of communication that we [communication staff] were just there to serve and didn't really know anything about it. The researchers' and the technicians' role was to say "You've got to do this, this and this" and we just carried out orders in that order. (Author interview 3, August 2012)

The fundamental concern for research scientists and technical advisers, on the other hand, was ensuring that precise information was conveyed. According to one adviser, this was a typical problem in the chain of activities from commissioning material to their delivery:

> Often our messages might be delivered to communications people in English, in poster form or something, and they pretty it up and do all their communication things and then it gets translated into [the Timorese lingua franca of] Tetun and the Tetun message can be incorrect at the end. (Author interview 7, July 2013)

He estimated that 60-80 percent of messages went out as intended but 10 percent "could be downright the opposite" of what was intended in the information

they contained. This inclined research staff to want to proof-read and rewrite as much of the material being produced as possible which, this adviser conceded, was time consuming and irritating. A silo mentality among different components in the office only made matters worse:

> I think we have our own job here in building up capacity in research and among the Timorese and are working really hard with all our jobs and then finding the time to walk downstairs and communicate with those guys [doing communication] may be part of the problem. (Author interview 7, July 2013)

This adviser conceded, however, that he and his colleagues might need to "back off" more and let the materials "just go out there". Demanding edits and re-designs was a constant frustration for everyone, he said. But so too was a tendency among some technical advisers to simply ignore communication staff and go their own way. According to one communication staff member there was an occasion early on in the life of SoL when a technical adviser did a lot of communication work without consulting anyone and the result was that it all had to be done again because it was incomprehensible (Author interview 4, August 2012).

Perceptions of a silo mentality were held by both researchers/technical advisers and communication staff. One of the former commented:

> The weakness of the communication people is they don't communicate. None of them. I've been shocked by it. They don't communicate much. They just sit there at their desks and if you want to communicate with them you've got to go down and sit next to them. I'm really shocked by people who are communicators and the lack of [their own communication]. I expected them to all be extroverts I guess. (Author interview 8, July 2013)

When told that communication staff felt similarly about the "upstairs" research staff, he conceded that "there is that division".

Building up stronger personal relationships across the disciplinary divide helped break down barriers — eventually. One communication staffer said he did this by making a point of asking researchers and technical advisers about their work, encouraging them to explain it and tell him about the stories behind it. This, he said, showed he was interested in what they did but also "stroked their egos" by paying them and their work such attention (Author interview 6, August 2012).

The fact that communication staff had begun delivering the posters and leaflets demanded by researchers and technical advisers was also instrumental in the gradual acceptance of the communication personnel and their role in the office. The simple process of interacting, in other words, was starting to work in ways that a pre-ordained 'blueprint' approach would most likely only have assumed. But the volume and complexity of the work still created challenges. As one communication staff member put it in the first twelve months of SoL's operations:

> The whole program here is quite complicated because there are so many audiences that it is sometimes hard to know what product is made for who and that's part of there not being good enough processes. A component might come to us and say "Make up this brochure or leaflet" but they didn't say who it is for because they kind of feel that's their position. They hold on to the content, they hold on to the writing, the audience is all their problem. But then you realize this brochure is supposed to be given to farmers and it got so much text that I don't even understand it and most farmers are illiterate. How the hell are they going to understand it?" (Author interview 3, August 2012)

6.3 Structural Impediments

The fact that SoL was coming to terms with a new focus on extension and that this had produced a huge demand for what might be regarded as conventional communication products — leaflets, brochures, posters — was complicating the positioning of communication within the project. According to one early communication staff member "there has been a struggle for communication to be accepted in this office" because most people "understood

communication as design" and little more (Author interview 2, August 2012).

By August 2012 a colleague concluded that the entire communication element in SoL was "muddled" and "confused" with "no real foundations about the way things were supposed to be done". It was a case, he said, of "work it out yourself" where what was needed was a "planned approach to communication rather than just pumping out leaflets and brochures and press releases" (Author interview 3, August 2102). There had to be a longer term view of the whole thing, he insisted. The 50-page communication strategy I had drafted toward the end of 2011 to outline how communication should be undertaken by the project had been overtaken by events. Said the same staff member:

> [The communication strategy] wasn't really followed. It gave us some understanding and background but it didn't really connect with what we were doing here. Everything is more organic than that [and] there was an explosion of requirements for communication and a scramble to get to it without really planning it out and the danger there is you do establish these ways of doing things and they're not the right way. (Author interview 3, August 2012)

To encourage better interactions between researchers/technical advisers and communication staff I suggested introducing a "Requisition Slip" for all communication materials in mid-2012. The form was simple and straightforward. A researcher or adviser commissioning material would give his name, the date of the request and the expected date of delivery. The slip required a brief description of the project and a profile of the audience the material was aimed to target. In this way the slip acknowledged that researchers and advisers were primarily responsible for initiating materials — entrenching a sense of correct order in the process — but allowed communication staff to prioritise calls upon their time and track the work requested.

Importantly, it also required those commissioning materials to provide essential basic information communication staff needed to tailor particular materials and maximize their intended impact on the audiences indentified.

This way of commissioning communication materials was used until mid-2013. By then, it had enabled a better understanding between researchers/advisers and communication staff about what each required in the design of more effective materials and so formalizing the process was no longer seen as necessary. A somewhat similar technique for encouraging interaction across disciplines replaced it and will be explained below.

6.4 Toward Accommodation

By August 2013 communication staff members were reporting that relations between them and researchers/technical advisers had improved. The two groups were getting on "a lot better now", one communication staff member said. He credited this to the fact that researchers and technical advisers were now "seeing what we're doing in terms of visual products" but also to the fact that "having strong relationships with them has changed everything" (Author interview 6, July 2013). Similarly a colleague felt that the communication staff were "developing quite a good relationship with the research guys": when the latter requested that some work be done "you have enough respect" to go back to them and suggest particular ways of doing it more effectively (Author interview 9, July 2013). Soon, this general assessment of how the two groups were working together was shared by researchers and technical advisers as well. As one adviser put it, "everybody is working together now" (Author interview 15, July 2014).

The acceptance accorded to communication staff members and their expertise hadn't come easily and only extended so far. One said that while there were no longer any signs of the "abrasive situation" that

had developed between communication staff and researchers/advisers in the early days of the project, there were still people in the office who didn't see the importance of what the former were doing. This staffer added:

> Part of the way to bridge that gap is that you have to prove your value to other areas before they'll actually start taking your advice seriously. My approach is much more you have to be very subversive and show your value before they'll start listening to you. (Author interview 9, July 2013)

But at least listening was now more common. The successor to the "Requisition Slip" was a "Key Messages Document" that had also been introduced to encourage researchers/technical staff and their communication counterparts to engage with each other. The document would allow the former to make their initiatives known early to members of the latter group who would them be encouraged to ask questions, and offer suggestions. "You can't win every battle," said the communication staff member who explained this approach, "but you've got to start small and slowly, slowly" (Author interview 9, July 2013).

Nevertheless, by 2014, senior staff members in SoL were expressing confidence that communication was no longer viewed as an alien implant within the project and were even celebrating the contribution the communication staff were making. One senior staffer reported that the latter group were "definitely" better understood and valued by everyone in the office and program coordinators back in Australia were also "fully supportive" of the communication program (Author interview 10, July 2014). The same year, a communication staffer could say that communication staff had "really strengthened our position and we're a regular part of what happens now and [researchers and technical advisers] will come to us for advice from all angles" (Author interview 19, July 2014).

7. Discussion

Obviously a degree of pre-planning is necessary whenever a role for communication at scale is deemed necessary to achieve the goals of an agricultural development project. The objectives of the communication component need to be defined, provision must be made for the recruitment or secondment of appropriate staff members, and some indication of a budget is necessary for the purposes of funding approval.

That said, positioning a communication component effectively within a development project requires much more than these three things. It typically means challenging a predominate view among researchers and/or technical advisers that communication involves little more than straight-forward exercises in information transmission. It means building respect for the professional skills communication staff members will bring to the project and allowing them a degree of latitude in applying those skills. And, hopefully, this leads to enlisting key personnel within the project to actively support communication activities that may seem to researchers or technical advisers a long way removed from the routine agricultural extension techniques appropriate in more developed countries.

A pre-planned communication strategy is unlikely to address these latter challenges because each of them involves cultural adjustment and shifts in attitude. Outlining a logical, evidence-based case for these things in a 'blueprint' document will not bring the necessary adjustment in thinking and practice about. What a communication strategy can do is ensure that, over time, appropriate processes have been put in place (such as the "Requisition Slip" and "Key Messages Document") to encourage the kind of personal interactivity that *eventually* fosters a positive working relationship between different disciplinary groups.

Nor can a pre-planned communication strategy predict all of the operational conditions that will impact on a project and it is unlikely to be able to account fully for the local communication environment in which the project is to be located (the

persistence of local dialects in everyday usage, literacy levels, access to mass media, cultural notions of reliable authority, etc). Seeds of Life, remember, had been active in Timor-Leste for ten years prior to the extension phase examined here and yet it got some fundamentals wrong. Those who designed the project for were over-confident of the contribution the local ministry's agricultural information unit could make to the project and they assumed far too much in terms of the influence of mass media in remote farming communities. It would have been preferable to prescribe communication objectives in the Project Design Document for Seeds of Life but to allow maximum flexibility to project staff in determining communication tactics once conditions on the ground were known *and as they changed*.

Ideally effective communication creates and sustains a relationship with an audience. Relationships are two-way, not one-way. This means little can be set in stone since not everything in a relationship is one side's prerogative. Acknowledging this, a good approach to communication is flexible and evolves. This is why, in terms of communication for development, evaluation should not primarily be about accountability but rather primarily about providing data on the impact of particular tactics and approaches to better calibrate both. Again this may involve a shift in attitudes — especially on the part of project managers and funding bodies — centred on the tricky but realistic expectation of delayed gratification.

8. Conclusion

Although this paper has focused on communication within an agricultural development project in Timor-Leste, the lessons learnt have wider applicability — both in countries with similar levels of development and in those where development communication outcomes remain disappointing. Attention much be focused on how communication is positioned in projects and so further research on this issue is required. What are the inter-disciplinary barriers within agricultural development projects that work against effective communication? What structural characteristics of these projects inhibit desired outcomes and how might these characteristics be addressed? How can project management be encouraged to give a role to communication commensurate with the expectations placed upon it?

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