

Community views on communication in Zimbabwe

By Kathy Bond-Stewart

Introduction

Impoverished communities – those seldom reached by mainstream media - are passionately concerned about communication. In recent years, as the crisis in Zimbabwe intensified, the Africa Community Publishing and Development (ACPD) carried out two research projects on community concepts, experiences, challenges and strategies of communication. These were published in the books *Regenerating: Towards a new strategy of community education and media* and *Follow the river and you will reach the sea: Community views on communication*. In addition, the concepts of “constructive” and “destructive” forms of communication were analysed in the booklet *Peace-building* and a chapter on communication in the book *No fruits without roots: community views on local governance*. Furthermore, this paper draws on 20 years' experience of community publishing - to be published in a forthcoming book *Even the smallest bird can sing from the tallest tree* – as well as on recent experiences of improving the way citizens and local leaders relate and communicate in a local governance process - to be described in a forthcoming manual *Belonging*.

Research on community views on communication

The first research project - done with Civic Education Network (CIVNET) and the Africa Book Development Trust (ABDT) and published as *Regenerating* - was a national survey of over 5000 social groups, carried out by 8 community based research teams. The research covered 50 out of 58 rural districts in all 8 provinces of Zimbabwe, as well as high-density areas in Harare, Bulawayo and small provincial towns. The process was nicknamed “the Social Capital research” because it investigated the ways in which people meet, communicate and provide mutual support in their neighbourhoods. The research was carried out in a violent atmosphere with a shoestring budget using the social resources of trusted community based research teams.

The survey covered information about the groups (their purpose, composition and frequency of meetings); their access to media, learning needs, language preference and interest in forming study circles¹⁰, as well as their achievements, concerns, suggestions and hopes. We discovered that every neighbourhood, whether urban or rural, has social groups that meet weekly without external assistance to improve their lives. A typical group would be organised to provide economic benefits for its members. It would have between 11 and 20 members, mainly women, aged between 21 and 50. The research found that the group's main access to media would be radio and postal services, while its main information needs related to economic survival; family wellbeing, children's rights and care, development studies and organising skills. They are also interested in different ways of organising society, peace building, laws and local governance. The group would enjoy written materials in basic English, but would want some materials in their own language, and they would be motivated to form a study circle.

While the groups do provide support for members in a difficult environment, they have very little access to information, and most lack participatory skills. In *Regenerating*, we outline a new strategy of community education and media, building on what is already there:

Strengthened social groups which both receive and send information, linked to ward, district, provincial and national community education networks, would provide the best opportunity of establishing community media, independent of both the state and the private sector. Lastly, as these social groups are small, and meet in their own homes, workplaces, churches and out of doors...in a way that is almost invisible to an outsider, they are less vulnerable to harassment.

The second research project, done with the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), examined community views on freedom of expression and access to information. The findings were published as *Follow the river and you will reach the sea: Community views on communication*. Twelve community based research coordinators with 50 research assistants collected information from 1000 respondents from a wide variety of backgrounds. The age of respondents ranged from 8 to 80 years. In addition to interviews and group discussions, researchers did listening surveys, got literate respondents to write, and encouraged people to

¹⁰ A study circle is a group of people that meets regularly to study a chosen topic together by reading about it, discussing what they read, and using information to improve their situation.

create art, poetry, songs and traditional stories based on the research themes. The response to the research exceeded all our expectations, especially as it was carried out in a tense, restrictive atmosphere. The research covered concepts, the human rights to freedom of expression and information, common problems, and come up with recommendations. Respondents defined communication, in the positive sense, as “interaction, through the exchange of views, a two way process based on free expression and access to information”. They agreed that a person, community, organization or country cannot develop without effective communication.

In this research, and other ACPD publications, impoverished groups described the experience of exclusion as being isolated from the world, not being recognised as human beings, being shy, afraid, despairing, ignored and controlled. Communication, as defined above, is vital to survival because it can give communities a sense of inclusion and belonging. It recognizes the value of community members, and helps to build confidence, courage, hope in that it allows them to command attention and take control of their lives. The title of the book on community views on communication *Follow the river and you will reach the sea*, sums up the main theme:

If you have a shared vision of freedom and a sense of direction, as well as the courage to seek the information you need, and express yourselves freely, you will be able to increase freedom in your community. In addition, through effective communication, you can inspire others to do the same.

Challenges

In *Follow the river...* we noted that communication problems are complex, and they cannot be tackled by single interventions. There are social, economic and political factors that limit people's freedom of expression and information in the family, and within local, national and international spheres. Contributors listed the following factors that hinder freedom of expression and information:

Social factors

- Discrimination on the basis of age, gender, ability, HIV/AIDS status and ethnic group
- Authoritarian family leaders
- Illiteracy and lack of educational opportunities
- Not speaking an official language
- Lack of rights awareness¹¹
- Negative traditions
- Negative attitudes
- Shyness, lack of self esteem

Economic factors

- Discrimination by the economic giants
- Poverty
- The class divide
- Hunger
- Isolation
- Lack of means of communication

Here are some examples of what respondents had to say about economic factors affecting their ability to communicate:

We are far away from everything; we feel we don't belong to the nation or even the world.
Radios are scarce, transmissions are poor, batteries are unaffordable, mail is not delivered regularly, stamps are unaffordable.
Telephones are far away and usually out of order.
Newspapers and magazines are very scarce, books are hard to find even at schools.
I have never seen a computer, what does it look like?

¹¹ The majority of respondents did not know about rights and laws including some teachers who had never heard of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

It is disappointing to be asked whether I have ever used a phone, radio, TV or post office. I only dream that one day my great grandchildren will have access to all these inventions. Everything is difficult to access in rural areas. Our voice is reduced, our thinking is reduced, and our deeds are limited.

Political factors

- Authoritarian leadership
- Abuse of power through bribes and threats
- Restrictive rules and laws
- Domination by one side, lack of objectivity
- Polarisation (divisions)
- Destructive communication (propaganda, lies, hate speech)
- Violence

Here are some examples of what respondents had to say about political factors affecting their ability to communicate:

Information from the state media is manipulated and distorted.
 We feel disabled because we cannot make informed decisions.
 If you express yourself, you fear being beaten, arrested, raped, tortured or killed.
 We are forced to chant the dominant views.
 We cannot exchange information freely because we are harassed. There are spies at work and spies in the community. Our mail is inspected...
 There is a wide gap between most leaders and the people, making communication impossible.
 Communication is the missing link that causes conflict to degenerate into violence.

Constructive and destructive communication

Constructive communication is not yet widely practiced, while destructive communication is a major problem in all spheres of life, from the personal to the political, and even within change agencies. It is important to recognise the difference between constructive and destructive communication in order to deal with it. In two publications produced through the community publishing process, *Peace-building* and *No fruits without roots* characteristics of constructive and destructive forms of communication were listed, and are summed up in the following table.

Constructive communication	Destructive communication
Recognises and respects, the value of each person.	Humiliates and devalues people
Inclusive, integrates previously marginalised groups and connects different groups	Exclusive, domination by one group
Active listening	Refusing to listen, ignoring, arguing or interrupting
Encourages and persuades people, enables them to make informed choices which are in their best interests	Dominates and controls people through threats and bribes
- Truth - Language which reflects the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a wide range of people	- Lies, propaganda, empty promises - Language which does not correspond to people's experiences
Adapting the way one communicates with specific groups to enhance understanding	Forcing views on others without taking their specific background into account
Examining media critically	Uncritically believing biased media, or accepting the unacceptable
Carrying out one's own research	Assuming one knows, without finding out
Being open to new ideas and information, using an integrated, flexible approach	Having a narrow, closed, one-sided view which is inflexible

Clarity, making important information accessible	Lack of clarity, unnecessary complication important. Information is only accessible to elite groups.
Encouraging the free expression of doubts and fears, and questions	Hiding doubts and fears, preventing difficult questions
Giving and receiving criticism constructively	Hate speech and intolerance, punishing people who don't accept the dominant views
Being balanced. Recognising the strengths and weaknesses in oneself, one's group, other groups, opponents	Asserting that 'we are always right. They are always wrong.'
Using humour constructively	Using jokes to attack one's opponents
Lively, creative use of language	Dull, predictable language
Reframing problems, that is, looking at them in a new ways.	Being blocked by one's habitual or conventional response to problems

Specific communication problems of marginalised groups

Within impoverished communities, there are some groups who are most severely affected by communication problems. These groups include the following:

Children: Half the Zimbabwean population is under 15 years, and 60% are children, the most oppressed yet potentially creative sector of the population. Yet the children's voices are rarely heard in public life. Their most frequent expression, used as a title of ACPD's book on children's rights is: *We are also human beings!*

Youth: Traditionally, youth could not speak at public meetings. Their low social position, worsened by their lack of educational and employment opportunities, continues to exclude them from public discussions, and makes them vulnerable to manipulation (for example, in the youth militias).

The elderly: Although wealthy elderly men have a lot of power, the situation of the impoverished elderly men and women is desperate. Many of them are caring for grandchildren orphaned by HIV and AIDS, and they have valuable historical and traditional knowledge, yet they are rarely consulted. As an elderly respondent said: "I feel I want to burst because I have experienced so much oppression and I am too old for this."

The disabled: The disabled form 10% of the Zimbabwean population, but there is very little recognition of their views and needs in public life. While disability problems such as immobility, blindness and deafness intensify communication problems, it is negative attitudes to disability which disabled people find most painful.

People who do not speak the main languages: The most impoverished rural communities in Zimbabwe, for example, the Tongas, Venda and Shangaan, are excluded from important discussions and decisions through a language barrier: "People decide for us, and take advantage of us."

The illiterate: Although the national literacy rate of the 15-24 year olds is estimated at 97%¹², in 4 Tonga-speaking wards in Gokwe North, where ACPD's working, it is 25%. In addition, the literacy rate is going down, as many children are dropping of school owing to poverty¹³. Illiteracy is one of the clearest indicators of extreme poverty, and it makes people very vulnerable to exploitation. Illiterate respondents spoke passionately about illiteracy as a form of death: "To be illiterate is like being dead, with stones all over your body."

¹² Figures provided by UNDP from the 'Progress Report of the millennium Goals', 4th draft, 2005.

¹³ The primary school completion rate has dropped from 84% in 1990 to 68% in 2004.

People living with HIV and AIDS: One of four Zimbabweans is HIV-positive, yet this large group of people is isolated, and frequently excluded from discussions and decisions on programmes which are meant to support them: “Anything we say is treated as useless...We are despised and treated as outcasts, sentenced to death in isolation and pain.”

Women: Many women lack access to the information they need, and are unable to express their views in public or private; a situation which is life threatening in the context of domestic violence and HIV and AIDS: “Men are a problem; they always dominate and refuse to listen to our ideas... We cannot discuss sex and contraceptives with our husbands, so even though we are faithful wives, we can get HIV and AIDS from our promiscuous husbands.”

People affected by forced removals: Although useful research has been done about people affected by forced removals¹⁴, no research has been done on these people’s communication needs. People were removed from urban areas with basic communication facilities, to areas with minimal or no facilities. We assume they are affected by the same lack of public voice and information as other marginalised groups.

Respondents from marginalized groups such as these used strong, emotional language to express how they felt about being denied the right to freedom of expression and information:

“We are nobodies and non-citizens. The poor are not listened to. The world and the word belong to the rich.”

“We feel very remote, as if we have been locked behind a steel door.”

“We feel we are dead logs, only moving when we are pushed by others.”

Community media experiences

As community media work in Zimbabwe is still small-scale, and needs to be expanded, the following points, from ACPD’s 20 years of community publishing experience, might be useful when considering a way forward for community media in Zimbabwe¹⁵.

Firstly, there are no “invisible people”, there are only some privileged people whose perception is clouded by prejudice and assumptions. This results in many forms of social exclusion. However, people within marginalised groups are very motivated to communicate, as it is a way to overcome exclusion. In order to tap this great potential, professional media workers need to approach communities with humility and respect, and ensure that the community media process is internally driven, in a way that benefits communities. Community media work alone will have little impact unless it is linked to overcoming internal oppression, community education, organising and advocacy, and some legal and material support.

It is possible to overcome fear, even in communities traumatised by violence; by gathering individual life stories and community histories which record people’s talents, dreams and sources of strength, as well as their suffering and how they overcame problems in the past. Having a sense of their value, and potential as individuals, developing their creativity, building on solidarity, articulating their views collectively, practicing peace-building and mastering communication and organising skills, gives people the confidence and courage to push for change:

- “People want this process because it gives them the courage to talk about their problems, express their views freely and take action.” Masvingo
- “We have arisen from the dead.” Tongas in Gokwe North
- “Community publishing empowers communities to take their lives into their own hands. It helps communities to participate in political, social cultural and economic life as critical citizens and aware individuals. It is about transforming ourselves, our homes, our villages, through reading, research, writing and organising, into places of love and peace.” Mashonaland West

Although community media workers have had to work in extremely dangerous, life-threatening situations, their training in effective communication, basic psychology and peace-building has enabled them to open up blocked, tense situations. Dealing with difficult people (i.e. dominating, aggressive people) - also known as “radical diplomacy” - is one of the crucial and most popular

¹⁴ For example, the reports by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, The Solidarity Peace Trust Action Aid and Combined Harare Residents Association, and United Nations.

¹⁵ In the forthcoming book on community publishing, *Even the smallest bird can sing from the tallest tree*, these experiences are described in detail with many quotations and concrete examples.

skills taught at community publishing workshops, and this has converted many opponents into supporters. For example, a war veteran who vigorously opposed the draft of an early community manual later asked for a million copies; one of the most feared central intelligence officers asked when we could begin community publishing in his home village, and another, who was about to beat us up, ended up by giving us his grandmothers' proverbs and stories.

One of the most urgent kinds of community media work needed during the intensifying Zimbabwe crisis is improving the way communities and the local authorities relate to, and communicate with each other. The Local Governance Community Capacity Building Programme¹⁶ was preceded by 2 years of research. The process has grown rapidly from coverage of 6 wards in 2002, to 72 wards in 3 districts in 2003, and will cover 120 wards in 5 districts in 2006. The process includes the following:

- Motivating district leaders to participate and take responsibility
- Setting up a district training team, which is made up of both community members and district leaders
- Running two rounds of ward workshops a year for 4 years, based on community publishing manuals and participatory methods
- Promoting village study circles, access to radios and a district newsletter
- Bringing previously marginalised groups into public discussions and local governance
- Conflict resolution
- Advocacy (at ward, district and national level)

While this is a comparatively new aspect of ACPD's work, the initial experience has been very positive and fruitful.

-“It was as if we were people lost in the wilderness, and finally this process has shown us the way.”

-“Corruption has been reduced because people now have the freedom to say what they want.” N. Gumpi, youth, Umzingwane

-“Before there was a conflict between the traditional and elected leaders. Through lack of information and miscommunication we went astray. Everybody went their own way. Now we know how to work harmoniously, and how to work in the right manner. At the workshop we learnt how to sit and talk and make decisions as equals. We learnt: We are all leaders. This is our goal – to develop the whole area. Our political differences do not matter.” Garret Nyathi, Village Head, Mbembeswana, Matobo

-“I used to be an autocratic leader but I have learnt how to be a democratic leader. When we went for training we were transformed in our way of thinking, transformed in our way of applying the law...” Bishop Dube, Matobo

Through improved communication and co-operation, communities and their leaders are tackling local problems, resulting in real improvements in people's lives such as the repair of a clinic, the completion of a hall, the construction of earth dams, raising money for rural electrification, and supporting orphans.¹⁷

Recommendations

As freedom of expression and access to information are hindered by several social, economic and political factors, in both personal and public spheres, our strategies should be integrated, and take all these factors into account. The strategies outlined here are summarised from the community research and community manuals produced over the last five years.

Promote a widespread awareness of destructive and constructive forms of communication

Promote peace building, creativity and democratic practice: While this approach requires a lot of discipline, it can be effective even in tense difficult situations: *“Peace-building is based on truth building. True and soft words will win hard hearts. Creativity protects the giver of a picturesque lesson...Creativity and has captivating...and has authority”*¹⁸

¹⁶ The programme has achieved a remarkable access to rural Zimbabwe, in spite of current restrictions, without compromising its principles, because of the credibility and long record of ACPD and C.W.E Matumbike, local governance specialist and former permanent secretary, and ACPD's radical diplomacy.

¹⁷ More information will be provided in a forthcoming manual: *Belonging : A guide to local governance community capacity building Phases 1-4*.

¹⁸ From *Bridging the divide* (ACPD/Amahorro 2004/2005)

Provide rural communities with a voice and influence in public life through community media. In selected wards, this includes:

- Training community media facilitators in community based research, education, media skills and organising
- Establishing community media houses with solar power or electricity, computers, printers, stationary and eventually phones and access to internet, as well as libraries, radios and videos.
- Promoting all forms of local creativity
- Setting up children's media teams
- Ensuring all marginalised groups have access to information and the means of communication
- Supporting the production and distribution of media on community priorities.

Carry out research on the media needs of people affected by forced removals, as a basis for providing appropriate support

Enhance the capacity of communities and their local authorities to relate and communicate with each other for good local governance: One of the most critical communication problems to solve is the gap between citizens and leaders, in order to make a real difference to the lives of the most marginalised groups. In addition, democratising the structures of local governance provides a strong framework for all media and development work. For example, in the long term, participating local leaders could apply for a community radio license, a request that would be undeniable. Debate and advocacy on community priorities can be carried out in a way that involves all institutions and sectors of the population within a rural district. As the process is locally managed and well documented potentially it could, with adequate resources, be replicated in any rural district in Zimbabwe.

Promote community education and media nationally: This strategy was outlined in *Regenerating*. As community publishing and local governance community capacity building cannot yet be carried out on a sufficiently wide scale, the idea is to increase the capacity and co-operation of national agencies involved in community education and media¹⁹, so that they can reach all rural wards, and impoverished urban wards, with improved services.

What is most important is to build on what is already there: self-managed neighbourhood groups that could both receive and send information through study circles, which could be supplemented by community libraries, with radios, and ward workshops. The process would include the training of trainers, and developing a core curriculum base on researched needs, combining relevant material already available with the production of new materials through community media.

Conclusion

This paper, based on ACPD's research on community views on communication, dealt with community priorities, challenges, the specific problems of marginalised groups, as well as strategies and recommendations. As 80% of Zimbabweans are impoverished, with limited access to information and the means of communication, it is important to prioritise support for community media within media support strategies for Zimbabwe. While community media exposes some of the most painful problems experienced in Zimbabwe, they can also reveal new sources of creativity and hope. This is expressed in this extract from the poem *Regenerating* by V. Khumalo:

We are ready to ascend...
Bringing life to those languishing in pain
Regenerating hope to those it has escaped,
Bringing courage...

We shall again sit together in study circles
Reading, writing, discussing
Pondering over the future,
Conceptualising with a sense of vigour
Acting to restore our lost pride
To restore our tarnished image,

¹⁹ These agencies could include CIVNET, MISA, ARDC, WIPSU, Silveira House, and Manicaland and Matabeleland churches.

to redress, to rectify...

Our minds to a new policy
shall give birth...
With renewed zeal we will dance
Playing the drums to reach the ears of those afar,
And then with tenacity, we will all shout the names
Community publishing!
Community education!
Community media!
Because they are full of love
In their veins flow the desire for change,
The desire to make a difference....

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