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The CSC dilemma in development: A possible solution

Grady Walker and Julie Arrighi

Given the challenges of measuring outcomes in Communication for Social Change, the use of proxy indicators can broadly support diverse initiatives. An example from Nepal illustrates an educational approach to social change whose intangible outcomes could be assessed using proxy indicators.

Asking a panel of experts on Communication for Social Change (CSC) to reach consensus on a definition of the term is like asking a kitchen full of chefs to agree on the ingredients in soup. Just as there are innumerable combinations of ingredients and recipes that can be used to prepare soup, there are countless practices and approaches that can be called CSC. In both cases one is left with something not quite solid, yet identifiable. Broadly speaking, the most common mechanisms for developing and delivering CSC projects are those belonging to international development, and this article will limit its discussion to that sphere.

The popularity of CSC reflects trends in international development that recognize the benefit of locally-driven communication processes directed towards changing society from the bottom up, rather than the instrumental large-scale top-down initiatives of classic development. Development, as an enterprise, remains constrained by its structural realities, which include reliance on the vagaries of funding priorities, and an economic rationale that demands every dollar spent be accountable to an audit, by accountant and conscience alike.

The reasons for this are clear, and commendable to be fair, but the paradox with CSC is that it is tricky to measure and quantify. After all, how does one plan a social change project and affix a dollar value to the outcome? Often, a balance has to be struck: CSC developers embed their projects as discrete components within a greater development cycle.

This article addresses two questions: First, is there an ideal way to practice CSC? Because of the tendency to seek a middle ground within the existing logical framework of development, CSC initiatives are in a perpetual mode of compromise. If, however, CSC is positioned within critical education, where the emphasis is on generative themes, it can be realigned to the way its early pioneers initially conceived it.

Second, how does a realigned practice then reposition itself within the existing logical framework of development? Rather than try to change that framework to one more conducive to supporting CSC, which has been the approach taken at the policy level with little success, CSC practitioners can adopt an approach that uses proxy indicators. This approach allows them to implement their initiatives while ticking all the correct boxes.

Critical education

An educational approach to CSC seems like a no-brainer, yet rarely do we see the necessary time and patience invested. In order to make the case for this approach, we must start by questioning the assumptions that form the scaffolding of CSC. When discussing social change, for whom are we speaking, and what changes are being spoken about? The attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, the achievement of which has driven the *modus operandi* of development for many years, is an aspirational and praiseworthy endeavour; yet it presumes keeping intact the current structural composition of society. Does the elimination of poverty, in fact, constitute social change, or must we change the system that perpetuates it?

Likewise, CSC approaches that simply leverage media and voice in order to engender social change beg the question: whose vision of change is being pursued? It is too easy for the voices of participants in CSC to be gathered up and directed

towards a vision of the future that they themselves did not articulate (regardless of how utopian that vision may be). It takes time to gain a critical understanding of the world to the extent required to articulate a vision of change. This is the reason early CSC pioneers like Paulo Freire focused their work on a critical education process and removing the barriers that prevented oppressed people from articulating their own vision of the future, or *unblocking subjectivities*.

The starting point of an educational approach is somewhere in that grey area: there is a need for transformative social change, and communication is the *sine qua non* of the transformation; however, those at the bottom must direct that transformation. This differs from the notion that social change can be enacted within the logic of the current global order by using grassroots communication in an organized and instrumental way.

Insider Windows

An example from the field of an education-based CSC initiative is the *Insider Windows* research project, a University of Queensland study recently undertaken by one of the authors in two districts in Nepal in 2014. In this project, participants made short films to investigate learning themes that were generated through consultation within the group. The movies they produced with their groups presented their analysis of the theme, often a social or environmental issue, and were used as a medium for communication.

By articulating an insider understanding of these issues, the educators and participants not only shared social and environmental messages horizontally and vertically in their communities, but also analyzed their own messages to achieve a deeper understanding of taken-for-granted norms in their societies. Following the conclusion of the project, participants continued their movie-making initiatives and engaged the community at large in innovative ways.

The continuation of the activities after the conclusion of the project and funding (which was negligible anyway: a stipend for the educator and a budget for snacks) exemplified the type of grassroots sustainability that would make a develop-

ment project officer swoon.

The project sought to create the conditions for social change through *conscientization*, a term introduced by Freire that is defined in its simplest form as "the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them" (Darder et al., 2009: 14).

Conscientization is achieved through *praxis*, which is the action element of critical education, and what Freire called "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (1970: 79). These concepts are not as radical today as they were in Freire's native Brazil in the 1960s. For advancing them he was handed a stint in prison by the military dictatorship that ruled the country at the time. Freire's vision of subject-driven social change remains central to communication for social change.

Conscientization through praxis might be problematic for a development organization – even the kind with a dedicated interest in CSC, but that does not mean there are no measurable outcomes. For example, Insider Windows project participants developed a critical awareness of environmental degradation in their communities. A seventeen-year-old project participant named Namuna had always taken pollution in her village for granted. After making a film she said:

"If society is polluted, we also get sick and we should take care of our village ourselves – we made a movie about this. So because of this, now when I walk around I pick up the garbage on the road and put it in the dustbin."

The challenge with these types of outcomes, from the perspective of a development organization, is that they *emerge* from praxis; they are not predetermined. Namuna could have just as easily made a film about caste discrimination at the local water pump, which is indeed what some other project participants did. This is why their chosen themes are called *generative*. It is difficult to get approval and funding for a project that does not have clear outcomes or an indication of what thematic direction it will take.

Consider education for a moment, there is no debate about the intrinsic value it has for learners, regardless of outcome. This is especially true for creative practices. Students who learn to play instruments are not expected to become professional musicians, but the benefits are acknowledged despite being unquantifiable. Likewise the praxis from *Insider Windows* is designed primarily to benefit the participants themselves, not necessarily to result in a tangible outcome. The tacit understanding is that effective praxis will then follow Freire's vision: to reflect on your world in order to change it.

The question then becomes: How does an educational approach to social change fit within the logical framework of international development, where the support and networks are in place and have a deep penetration into many societies? The use of proxy indicators is a method suggested by the authors for consideration.

Community resilience and proxy indicators

Within the international development sphere the increasing focus on community resilience creates an interesting opportunity for exploring a critical education approach to communication for social change. A recent study titled *Characteristics of a Safe and Resilient Community,* conducted by Arup International Development for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, identified six key characteristics that lead to safety and resilience at a community level.

Among them was "individual knowledge and awareness as central to the ability of households individually and collectively to be able to prepare, prevent, respond to and recover from shocks and stresses." Other key characteristics included, among others, how *organized* the community is to

This page and next: Insider Windows project participants prepare to shoot a scene. (Authors' photos).

identify problems, establish priorities and act and how *connected* a community is to *external actors who provide a wider supportive* environment (2012: iv).

In the years since this study was published, a focus has been placed within the Red Cross on designing and implementing resilience projects that aim to strengthen the six characteristics. The strength of the community group, and wider community, in these areas is far more important to sustaining increased resilience than any of the other tangible actions and outputs that may be completed in a three-or four-year project. Yet, a focus is often placed on reporting tangible outputs, in part because of the difficulty in measuring the more important but less tangible goals associated with strengthening non-measurable characteristics.

To overcome the challenge of measurements, there are ongoing efforts to develop indicators to ensure that these key characteristics are strengthened. For example, under the characteristic of "connectedness", tracking the number of meetings a community group has with local officials or other stakeholders per month becomes a proxy for the strength of the communities' connectedness to an external network that can be relied on in times of need.

Similarly, under the theme of "organized", tracking items such as the number of times internally-organized and resilience-focused community groups meet independently, as well as with the wider community, can be used to measure the increasing level of internal organization within a community. Even though these indicators cannot speak to the content or quality of interactions, or overall leadership abilities of the risk reduction group, they are effective as proxies.

An area of measurement within community resilience that needs much further exploration is the area of "knowledge". Specifically, how can we move beyond merely tracking the number of

people attending training sessions and their pre- and post-test results to also tracking proxy indicators that measure the level of critical reflection and knowledge creation within a group or community? From this perspective, the number of people participating in a critical education program can be a way to measure the existence of, and participation in, a process, and this can become a proxy for the intangible value and experiences gained during that process.

Moving forward

Given the lack of consensus among experts as to what constitutes CSC, it is the authors' belief that the use of proxy indicators can broadly support diverse initiatives. With an expanding focus on community resilience in the international development sector, there are increasing examples of finding proxy indicators to track the more intangible elements that lead to social change. This provides a valuable opportunity to the CSC community for further integrating their approaches into the international development sphere, especially when focusing on an educational approach to CSC.

Although the Nepal example of CSC, inspired by critical education, is provided as a realignment of practice, it is not the only approach that can benefit from the use of proxy indicators. At the very least, practitioners are encouraged to be innovative when making the case for CSC within their organization by conceiving ways in which intangible outcomes can be measured within the existing logical framework of development. ∎

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