

# Perspectives of Development Communication Post the Millennium, 2000 to Present

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.21050137](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21050137)

## Abstract

This paper critically examines the shifting perspectives of development communication from 2000 to the present, tracing its evolution from top-down modernization approaches to participatory, inclusive, and technology-enabled models. The analysis highlights how global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have influenced communication strategies, while also addressing the roles of key actors including civil society organizations, private sector players, and multilateral institutions. Emphasis is placed on the impact of digital technologies, bottom-up communication strategies, and models such as Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) and the Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change (IMCSC). The paper uses case studies from Uganda, Kenya, and Cameroon to demonstrate how modern development communication supports health promotion, climate action, and youth engagement. It also engages with emerging challenges such as misinformation, the digital divide, data privacy, and contested global-local narratives. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for inclusive, ethical, and adaptive communication approaches to support sustainable development in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC), Development Communication, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Participatory Communication.

## Introduction

Development communication, traced back to the 1940s- a period after World War II, is compounded from development, and communication, two semi-autonomous and yet very interdependent drivers of social change. Development is a process that fosters positive change, transformation, and the enhancement of well-being at the individual, community, national, or societal level. (Inyang, Alegu, Iorlaha, Adelaja, and Maku, 2019). Similarly, Lagerwey (1990), as cited in Israel (2018) also defines development as a process that fosters growth, progress and positive change. Moemeka (1989) calls development a change for the better. Collectively, there is consensus that development is a process and therefore takes time, which eventually leads to the betterment of society on several fronts including the social, economic and even individual level.

Communication is at the gut of human existence as underscored by Singh and Bharti (2021) who note the role it has played in the advancement of civilization. Initially playing the role of basic expressing and socialization, communication has since evolved with the advancement of technology to serve multiple functions such as information sharing, entertainment, education, and cultural exchange. They further recognize communication as a key tool for societal development and public well-being in fostering integration, persuasion, advocacy, awareness creation, and facilitating discussions on national and international issues.

As such, development communication is then regarded as the sharing of alleviating, enhancing and empowerment messages with the target audience aimed at elevating its standard of living (Inyang, Alegu, & Maku, 2020). It therefore seeks to integrate strategic communication into development projects. (University of Nairobi, nd)

## Historical Evolution of Development Communication

Development communication arose as a tool for helping in efforts to reconstruct and address issues like the economic depression, poverty and illiteracy in Asia, Latin America and Africa following the second world war through radio programs like Canada's Farm Radio Forums that ran between 1941 to 1965 - facilitating dialogue

among farmers which was later mapped out in Ghana, Africa.

According to Kyianytsia, (2021), modernization paradigms informed development communication during the mid- to late 20th century, premised on the dichotomy between modernity and traditionalism. Pioneered by Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) and Edward Shils (1911-1995), modernization theories suggests that societies evolve in a structured, progressive way and are a shift from traditional to modern societies with key characteristics of modernity, including the dominance of industry over agriculture, individualism over collectivism, and secular knowledge over religion all linked to industrialization, democracy, social equality, and welfare-oriented policies.

The top-down approach was prominent during this period, rooted in the belief that development was something to be “given” to the community as mere passive recipients of knowledge i.e. from the development experts to the communities. In essence, people were seen as subjects to be improved/changed as opposed to being active participants in their own development journey. We see scholars like Lerner and Schramm (1964) talk about the heavy reliance on media to spread the new modernization ideas through concepts like diffusion of innovation that sought to communicate innovations through particular channels severally over time among members of a social system in a sequence of stages including awareness, interest, persuasion, decision, adoption and confirmation (García-Avilés 2020).

However, by 1970, critics argued that this approach was too top down, pro-innovation, and ignored local realities yet real development needed community participation thereby paving way for the birth of participatory communication in led by Latin American Scholars like Paulo Freire who advocated for two-way communication in a bid to build general acceptance for sustainable action in development projects (Singhal, 2003). Thus, saw development communication expand to social campaigns like Bolivia’s soybean nutrition program and U.S.-funded comic books in post-war Kosovo (Kyianytsia, 2021).

### **Global Development Agenda post 2000**

The start of the new millennium came with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight global goals agreed upon by all 191 UN member states, aiming to be achieved by 2015. They came from the UN Millennium Declaration, signed in 2000, where world leaders committed to tackling major global issues like poverty, hunger, disease, education gaps, environmental damage, and gender inequality.

The eight goals included: ending extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child and maternal deaths, fighting diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, ensuring environmental sustainability, and building global partnerships for development. (UHC2030, n.d.)

While the MDGs led to progress in many areas, they also revealed limitations, particularly in sustainability, inclusivity, and local ownership. As 2015 approached, the need for a more holistic and integrated framework became eminent.

In response, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015. Also called the Global Goals, the 17 SDGs form a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and promote peace and prosperity by 2030 (UNDP, n.d.). Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are interconnected and emphasize a balance between social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Countries committed to prioritizing those furthest behind, aiming to end poverty and hunger, fight disease, promote gender equality, and eliminate discrimination against women and girls. Achieving these goals requires collaboration across sectors and the mobilization of technology, finance, and local knowledge from governments, civil society, the private sector, and individuals.

### **Actors in the Development Communication Ecosystem**

Development communication operates within a complex network of actors. From grassroots organizations to

global institutions, each plays a unique role in shaping how communication for development (C4D) is planned and delivered. According to Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang (2024), sustainable outcomes are most effective when responsibilities are shared across a wide range of stakeholders, each contributing specific strengths and resources.

***Rise of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and NGOs as Implementers-*** Civil society organizations and NGOs have moved beyond advocacy roles to become key implementers in development communication. Given their closeness with communities, they are able to tailor messages to local needs, making them effective at delivering participatory communication.

For example, organizations like BRAC, CARE, and Amref Health Africa use community radio, storytelling, and interpersonal dialogue to address issues like health, education, and social norms. In Uganda, for example, CSOs supported the Obulamu? campaign by leading local dialogues that reinforced national health messages (Burke et al., 2020).

CSOs are also vital in contexts where government presence is limited or mistrusted as is the case in countries like Uganda. They help promote inclusion, transparency, and accountability, especially for marginalized groups such as women, youth, and LGBTQ+ communities.

***Role of the Private Sector in Communication Delivery-*** The private sector increasingly contributes to development communication through infrastructure, innovation, and funding. For instance, mobile companies like MTN and Airtel have partnered with health programs to send SMS alerts. Digital health companies such as Rocket Health provide remote consultations and awareness through online platforms.

Private sector actors also support campaigns through corporate social responsibility (CSR), media literacy initiatives, and strategic messaging. Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang (2024) highlight their role in reaching digitally connected populations. However, challenges such as data privacy and commercial interests require clear regulation and oversight.

***Partnerships Between Institutions and Governments-*** Partnerships between governments and global institutions like the UNDP, UNICEF, and WHO are essential for coordinated development communication. These collaborations ensure that messages align with national development plans and global goals.

For example, in Kenya, UN Women partnered with government agencies and civil society to deliver gender-focused communication through the Joint Programme on Gender Equality (UN Women, 2022). In climate-related campaigns, the Green Climate Fund works with governments to design messages that reflect both local knowledge and international priorities.

Such partnerships bring together technical expertise, resources, and legitimacy. They help ensure that communication strategies are trusted, consistent, and responsive to both local and global needs.

## **Development Communication in the post 2000 era**

The post 2000 era also coincided with the rapid expansion of digital technologies, which transformed development communication. Traditional media such as television, radio, and print were increasingly supplemented by new media like the internet, mobile phones, and social platforms. These tools enabled more participatory, two-way communication, improving transparency and community engagement. In fact, modern development communication is now being used to address the world's most pressing needs such as health, climate change, and quite recently, the information disorder- enshrined in the SDGs seek to ensure all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

A major shift seen in development communication in the post 2000 era is the rise of "bottom-up" communication approaches, where individuals are more actively engaged as opposed to being passive as was the case in the pre-2000 era. A Wilson and Irvin (2013) study on the effectiveness of different communication

approaches in promoting energy-saving behaviors compared bottom-up (participatory) and top-down (authority-led) communication strategies by testing six different communication activities with some using participatory (bottom-up) approaches, and informational (top-down) methods. Findings from the study revealed that bottom-up approaches were more effective at changing behavior than top-down methods because the former created a supportive environment where participants could discuss progress with like-minded individuals. Also, bottom-up approaches were more effective due to the pre-existing motivation of participants i.e. those already inclined to change were more responsive to the approach. As such, intention alone is not enough. Successful behavior change depends on how well individuals implements their intentions.

**ICT for Development-** The new millennium witnessed a shift from traditional to digital media. Unlike before where communication was one way through the traditional channels like radio, print and television, the rise in the use of internet and IT has facilitated more participation in the development agenda. We now see interaction between beneficiaries and the experts through platforms like social media's X Spaces, Opinion Polls on Facebook and WhatsApp. If anything, traditional media houses have been forced to match with the trend and incorporate social media into their channels and interact with their audiences in real time.

A case in point is U-Report. This bottom-up communication tool developed by UNICEF allows youth known as U-Reporters to share their opinions and experiences in real time through SMS, social media like WhatsApp and Facebook on key development issues such as health, education, child protection, and emergencies. This data is thereafter used in informing development programs, government policies, and advocacy efforts subsequently creating a feedback loop as the U-Reporters receive updates on how their contributions influence decision-making. As such, the youth have a voice in the design and implementation of their development projects. (UNICEF. 2019)

Another example is Rocket Health, a telemedicine company in Uganda that leverages digital technology to improve access to health care. It carries out online consultations, prescriptions and dispatch of medicines through social media, text messaging and mobile phone applications thereby deconstructing geographical barriers to healthcare access. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, Rocket health defied the restrictions that came with the lockdown imposed by the government of Uganda to contain the pandemic by facilitating real-time virtual access to healthcare thereby bridging the gap between patients and healthcare providers. (Rocket Health, n.d)

**Health Communication-** Health, the third SDG, is a sphere that has greatly morphed to embrace contemporary development communication through use of its modern key approaches like Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC). Although SBCC predates the new millennium all the way back to the diffusion of innovation era, it has become widely recognized in the 2000s as a distinct approach- emphasizing participatory, audience-driven communication in fostering positive change in behavior and culture in a bid to drive sustainable development. Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (no date) underscores SBCC as being key in addressing the world's most pressing health problems evolving around methodical application of interactive, theory based, and research-driven communication processes and strategies for change at the individual, community, and social levels.

### **The Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change (IMCSC)**

The Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change (IMCSC) developed in 2002 by Figueroa, Rani, and Manju Lewisline, further builds on the 1960s development communication models but places emphasis social change being participatory, meaning that communities themselves should evaluate their progress rather than relying solely on outsiders. It posits that communities can solve their problems through discussion (dialogue) and teamwork (collective action)- describing an ongoing process where people come together to talk about an issue, take action, and improve their lives. It also provides seven key indicators to measure social change i.e. leadership, participation, access to information, and social norms. By using this approach, communities build trust, strengthen their ability to work together, and become better at solving future problems. Given that the model is both descriptive (explains what happens) and prescriptive (recommends what should happen), it is useful for communities, NGOs, and researchers in designing development programs.

## Case study of the Obulamu campaign (2014-2017) in Uganda:

Obulamu? translated as "How's Life?" is a popular loose greeting in Uganda. The Obulamu campaign was an integrated and participatory SBCC campaign that emphasized community involvement, dialogue, and collective action to promote health-related behavior change. Its key focus areas were evolving health needs in HIV, fertility, maternal and child mortality, malnutrition, malaria, and tuberculosis. The nationwide campaign, spearheaded by the USAID/Communications for Healthy Communities in collaboration with the Ministry of Health Uganda, focused on the different stages of life of individuals and their families, cognizant of behavioral determinants including knowledge, motivation, skills, gender, and social norms (Obulamu, no date).

Subsequently, a National Behavior Change Communication Working Group (BCC WG) was constituted in 2007 by the health ministry to facilitate knowledge and experience sharing in health communication. This campaign capitalized on intensive use of mass media like radio, television, social media to convey messages. Findings by Burke et al. (2020) reveal that this campaign led to improvements in select HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and maternal and child health outcomes due to exposure to topic-specific messages. This campaign is a good example of how modern development communication can be used in improving health outcomes.

## Environment/Climate Change Communication

Climate change is the United Nations 13th SDG that seeks to take urgent action to combat it and its impacts. Ganapathy (2021) notes "Every thought on climate action should be amplified through the medium of mass media to empower individuals, communities and governments to take the necessary steps forward."

A 2018 study conducted in Cameroon highlights how media outlets, particularly radio stations and newspapers, engage in climate change discourse. The study sampled 28 media outlets across the Northwest Region of Cameroon with findings showing that 71.42% broadcast climate-related programs and 67.85% air other environmental content. Most pertinent to this discussion – public engagement with climate issues was evident, as media outlets employed interactive programs, expert discussions, and field investigations to highlight climate vulnerabilities. However, only 42.85% of the sampled media houses leveraged social media for climate change communication, indicating a gap in digital engagement (Tume, Jumbam, Nsoseka, Nyarka, Yenla, & Njodzeka, 2018).

## Challenges and Criticisms of Development Communication Post-2000

However, along with the 2000s technological advancements came what has come to be known as the Information Disorder (misinformation and disinformation). BBC Media Action's research into information disorder in 15 countries across North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia found that misinformation is widespread, with many people encountering it daily or weekly. For example, in Tunisia, 39% of people said they see false information every day, while in Afghanistan, about 50% reported similar experiences. The study also revealed that misinformation has serious consequences, such as increasing political instability, religious conflicts, stress, and financial scams. In countries like Ethiopia and Zambia, people said false information damages trust within communities and slows down development. (BBC Media Action, 2024)

Another key concern in the post 2000 development communication era is the digital divide. Defined as the gap between those with and without access to technology, the internet and digital literacy training, Kituyi (2018) argues that the level of digital integration has the power to significantly influence a country's capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite the fact that Kenya's digital economy contributes 7.7 percent of Africa's GDP, (Okello, 2024) the digital divide in Kenya is evidenced by the fact that the country currently ranks 89th of 112 countries globally and 7th of 25 countries in Africa in digital ranking according to the Digital Quality of Life index (DQL). This represents 92 per cent of the global population according to Surfshark, the Cybersecurity company that conducted this survey. (Surfshark, n,d)

Okello (2024) attributes the digital divide in Kenya to a number of factors including but not limited to limited access to digital equipment, gender inequality with women facing greater obstacles than men in accessing digital technology, poverty, high cost of digital equipment and urban–rural disparity with round 70.7 percent of Kenyan people living in rural areas (Seow et al. 2019) To harness the digital divide, Kenya has highlighted IT-enabled services like the Digital Literacy Program as part of its vision 2030.

Another criticism of modern development in the new millennium is the debate over global versus local narratives. For example, Owuor's (2007) study on the integration of African indigenous knowledge into Kenya's formal education system as a means to promote sustainable development examined the significance of indigenous knowledge, the government's efforts to indigenize curricula, and the challenges of incorporating local knowledge into education. Using a qualitative approach, the study found that Kenya's school system heavily relied on Western perspectives, making education disconnected from local realities. It recommended the integration of indigenous knowledge to address knowledge gaps and enhance sustainability.

Privacy and surveillance issues in digital communication are also on the rise despite the tremendous contribution ICT has had in modern development communication. Individual and organizational privacy have become more vulnerable now that data is gathered, analyzed, and stored at a higher volume and therefore prone to cyber attacks like hacking, phishing, and ransomware. ICT gadgets like mobile phones are secretly collecting information from users. Technology firms and advertisers are able to monitor people's movements, search histories, buying behavior and social media usage (Zuboff, 2019). Facebook and X (previously Twitter) allegedly make money from selling user information, and search engines like Google gather users' activities on the Internet in order to improve targeted advertisements. This triggers issues of consent, ownership of data, and privacy.

To mitigate this, different countries like Kenya have introduced the laws on data protection and created the corresponding legal requirements to provide people greater control over their data. For example, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), applies to the European Union member states setting high standards for data processing, collection, and usage. (European Union, 2016). The Data protection Act of Kenya 2019 was developed to mirror the GDPR in regulating data processing in the country. It lays down standards like openness, responsibility, and using minimum data. (Kenya Data Protection Act, 2019).

## Future predictions

The future of modern development communication is now tending into the use of artificial intelligence in development and predicting trends. For the price we are paying for the advancements in modern development communication, there is an opportunity to harness the misinformation, safety, privacy and the ethical gap in order to protect and sustain the development gains of the new millennium.

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