TRACKING INITIATIVES IN **COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT** IN THE NEAR EAST

TRACKING INITIATIVES IN **COMMUNICATION** **FOR** **DEVELOPMENT** IN THE NEAR EAST

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

Various training experiences and research on Communication for Development in the Near East region have revealed that there is a poor understanding of Communication for Development and what it should be used for. Such activities are often perceived simply as a tool used to facilitate information gathering or pure dissemination.

Communication for Development is, however, a much wider concept that goes beyond information dissemination to play a crucial role in engaging all stakeholders, from policy to grassroots levels. Indeed, well-planned communication strategies and processes can set the stage for mutual dialogue among all players, which facilitates building partnerships and links that help to effectively address national priorities while responding to farmers' needs and ensuring their participation at the same time.

It is therefore critical for development institutions to start a reflection about advancing Communication for Development in the Near East region, to share experiences, build common understanding and agree on a strategy and joint initiatives for the region.

The main objective of this booklet is to provide an overview of current initiatives and projects focusing on Communication for Development applied to natural resources management and agriculture in the region, assess the main challenges, and identify links and opportunities to strengthen their collaboration and further advance Communication for Development in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an integral part of development efforts, but opinions as to how it should be used to improve livelihoods in the developing world vary considerably. The key players in development, from government bodies, donor agencies and research institutions to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and small-scale farmers, all have their own perceptions about the role and purpose of communication in the context of development. Some see it as primarily a vehicle for telling people what to do, others as an opportunity for interaction, discussion and information sharing.

Communication for Development is intended to facilitate the integration of interpersonal communication methods with conventional and new media channels, including radio, video, print, and information and communication technologies (ICTs), with the focus on encouraging all stakeholders, including primary stakeholders, to participate in the process. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO; 2006) defines Communication for Development as: "A social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. It is also about seeking change at different levels including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change."

Building a communication strategy to achieve these goals requires planning. Too often, decision-makers in development fail to put communication planning at the centre of development programmes, but simply add on a communication element later to inform people about the outcome of the work. Development communication practitioners consider a carefully planned communication strategy, implemented at the outset of a development programme or project, as crucial to the success of development interventions.

In order to strengthen awareness among decision-makers about the importance of communication planning, many practitioners have found it useful to focus on the different functions of communication and the relevant methodologies that can be applied. This has led to the development of typologies of communication that can be used to design, implement, track and assess communication initiatives. This booklet focuses on tracking Communication for Development initiatives in the

1

Near East (see Box 1). It is based on a paper written for the Technical Consultation on Communication for Development held in Cairo, Egypt in June 2006, and later modified to reflect the outcomes and thoughts of FAO-sponsored workshops for extension staff in Tunisia in 2006 and Jordan in 2007. The paper was part of a series of consultations and studies that were organized by FAO and the World Bank in preparation for the 1st World Congress on Communication for Development in Rome, Italy in October 2006. The consultations and studies were used to provide background material for a compendium on trends and experiences in Communication for Development in Asia, the Near East, South and Central America, and East and Southern Africa (Quarry and Ramirez, 2006).

The consultation in Cairo provided an opportunity for communication practitioners in the Near East to meet and share experiences in the application of Communication for Development in the region. It focused on such topics as communication in agricultural development and natural resource management, gender issues in implementing communication strategies and the need for more participatory approaches. This revealed a significant and growing interest in Communication for Development in the Near East.

In **Part 1** of this booklet we look at a typology of Communication for Development, and then we use this typology in **Part 2** to track communication initiatives in the Near East. In **Part 3** we look at regional commonalities, the challenges facing communication initiatives and the opportunities there are to further develop the design, implementation and assessment of Communication for Development in the region.

Box 1   DEFINITION OF 'NEAR EAST'

Development agencies vary not only as to which countries they include in the term 'Near East', but also about what they call the region (Western Asia; Middle East and North Africa; Western Asia and North Africa; and so on).

In this book we use the regional term and definition followed by FAO, based on the area covered by the FAO Regional Office for the Near East in Cairo, Egypt. The region includes 20 countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Part 1

A TYPOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION

Communication initiatives can fulfil a variety of functions, depending on the intended purpose of the intervention. To identify these functions, it is useful to see communication as a spectrum, along which there are various types of communication strategies (Quarry, 2006).

THE COMMUNICATION SPECTRUM

As shown in Figure 1, at one end of the spectrum of communication strategies is communication for **public relations and disseminating information**. Governments, organizations and the private sector all need to communicate in this way to enhance their image and keep people informed.

Figure 1 THE COMMUNICATION SPECTRUM

Public relations (PR) / disseminating information (ONE WAY)	Awareness raising / educational (ONE WAY)	Social marketing (ONE WAY)	Behaviour change (CONTEXTUAL)	Participatory (TWO WAY)
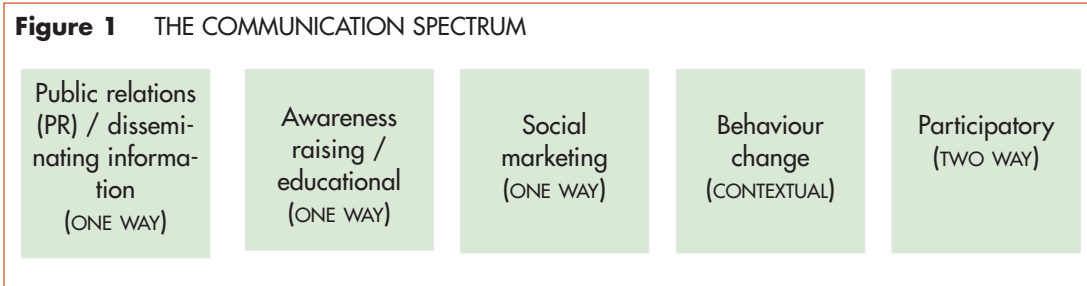
Further along the spectrum is **awareness-raising and educational communication**. This type of communication is intended to increase people's awareness of certain issues (e.g., effective approaches to tackling a particular disease, or the need for farmers to wash their hands after planting a particular type of seed). It is one-directional communication and tends to be top-down or vertical, often involving an agency or organization telling people what to do without recourse to discussion. (It is worth noting, however, that an effective awareness-raising campaign would be based on research into the attitudes and practices of the target audience.)

As far as communication is concerned, many development interventions stop here, and this is often why they do not work out as expected. Development practitioners sometimes assume that merely conveying a piece of information will serve to bring about

3

change. They fail to take account of the importance of context – how local conditions, or indeed national conditions, might not provide the environment needed to enable people to act on the information (e.g., adopt a new food processing technique, if the materials required are not available or affordable).

Social marketing, developed in the USA, tries to meet this challenge by adopting commercial marketing techniques to address social issues. It enters the realm of what many now call behavioural change communication, which is characterized by research into the attitudes and practices of the target audience to discover what needs to be addressed to help bring about a change in behaviour. Many development practitioners argue that, like awareness-raising communication, this is not enough. The social context in which people live also dictates behaviour, and if the information being conveyed is not adequately contextualised, a communication initiative is likely to fall short of its objectives.

It is only when we get to the farthest end of the spectrum – **participatory communication** – that the importance of the *process* of communication becomes apparent. Disseminating information via various channels (e.g., a radio soap drama, printed extension leaflets, community development videos) represents only one step in the process of communication. The message contained in a radio soap, for example, might have been developed as a result of discussion with the target audience or it could initiate a new series of communication activities. It is by providing the target audience with the opportunity to discuss an issue that moves a communication initiative away from a vertical, one-way process towards a horizontal, two-way participatory process.

Bessette (2004) defines participatory communication as "a planned activity based on participatory processes and on media and interpersonal communication". The stated

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aim of participatory communication is to facilitate dialogue and discussion among all stakeholders involved in a development initiative, which represents a shift from disseminating information to a far more inclusive effort.

For this involvement to be useful and effective, however, some capacity building is usually needed to support the stakeholders' participation in the communication process.

This applies particularly to primary stakeholders, who are likely to be marginalized, illiterate and/or unfamiliar with the process (e.g., to ensure that women make an effective contribution to the process, they need to feel confident in doing so).

Empowerment is a prerequisite for participation in communication, but it is equally important to sensitize decision-makers, who already have power, to the need to collaborate with the newly empowered in the communication process (e.g., in the field of gender empowerment, experience suggests that it is essential to include men in creating the right environment for the equal participation of men and women in the development process; BouSalah, 2006).

CATEGORIZING COMMUNICATION FUNCTIONS

Roling (1994) simplified the typology of communication illustrated in Figure 1 by categorizing communication according to three main functions:

- **Policy communication:** used to make new policies and regulations known (e.g., when a government launches a new policy on the use of water resources, communication media are used to inform the public about the policy)

- **Educational communication:** used to transfer new ideas, knowledge, skills and technologies (e.g., extension workers demonstrating new grain storage techniques)

- **Participatory (or facilitative) communication:** used to bring together stakeholders to voice needs and priorities, discuss ideas and develop ways of working together on a multi-stakeholder basis (e.g., setting up forums where farmers can work with rural radio broadcasters to develop a programme on pest management)

We have found that grouping communication initiatives into these categories is a useful way of explaining various communication activities.

We have added a fourth category:

- **Communication for networking and coordination:** used to link common-interest groups through electronic media to exchange ideas and information (Ramirez and Quarry, 2004)

The growth of internet and satellite technology and the advent of mobile phones has created new opportunities for communication to flourish around the world. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have the potential to reduce isolation, facilitate dialogue and participation, and foster interactive networks. In the developing world, the convergence of traditional communication channels with new ICTS can greatly enhance people's ability to share experiences and knowledge, and creates new opportunities for using communication among key players in agriculture

and rural development to address priority issues. It also presents new challenges that need to be addressed, such as the lack of trained communicators, lack of relevant content, poor ICT infrastructures and limited access to ICTs, as well as the continuing problem of low literacy rates in developing countries (FAO, 2004).

Part 2

COMMUNICATION INITIATIVES IN THE NEAR EAST

Given the varying perceptions of the role of communication, the diversity of communication initiatives and how they are implemented, and the relative lack of documentation on them, it is seldom easy to track these initiatives, and this is as true for the Near East as it is for most developing regions. As noted by El Hadidy (2006):

> For Arab practitioners, space is needed to reflect on experience, develop insights, document stories and share with others. In a workshop held in Jordan in 1997 participants from nine countries in the Middle East reflected on the lack of documentation of local participatory practice, and indicated their enthusiasm for a forum that brings them together to discuss their experience in the field. Few attempts have yet been made, and none was sustained.

In preparing this overview of communication initiatives, we were able to identify only a small number among what we believe to be a wide range of communication activities in the Near East. For that reason, we see this book as a 'work in progress', aimed at encouraging communication practitioners to contribute their ideas and experiences to help develop a compendium of communication initiatives in the region. In collaboration with the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit at the American University of Beirut, FAO has launched a Communication for Development portal (http://www.comdev-near-east.org/web/main.php) intended to provide a forum for such interaction.

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THE NEAR EAST REGION

The Near East is composed of countries with diverse climatic conditions, varying resources and different levels of economic development. The challenges they face, however, share many similarities, which warrants a search for common solutions that can be adapted to specific country situations. In the region as a whole, agriculture accounts for 13% of the gross domestic product (GDP), as opposed to a world average of 5% of GDP and less than 2% of GDP in the USA. Agriculture is an important generator of employment in several Near Eastern countries. In 2001, agricultural labour accounted for up to 10% of the labour force in the Gulf States, Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, and 30-40% in Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco and Sudan. The overall average for the region has declined from 64% of the labour force in the 1970s, 56% in the 1980s and 45% in the 1990s to 37% in 2001 (Dyaa, 2006).

Natural resources degradation is especially serious in low-rainfall areas, representing 70% of the total land area. Demographic pressure, cultivation of marginal and fragile lands and inappropriate use of inputs have all contributed to this degradation. Thus, the rural poor, most of whom depend on agriculture, face many barriers to development, but they are not used to grouping together to seek solutions from economic, political or administrative institutions. They have a weak voice in local politics, little leverage in negotiating with decision-makers, and are ill at ease dealing with government institutions.

The communication initiatives we outline here all relate to agriculture and natural resource management in the Near East. They illustrate the potential of Communication for Development in these contexts, and are grouped according to their main communication function, based on Roling's (1994) categorization – policy communication, educational communication, participatory communication – and our additional category, communication for networking and coordination.

POLICY COMMUNICATION

For this category we describe three communication initiatives, relating to:

- Syria's National Agricultural Policy Centre (NAPC)
- IDRC's Water Demand Management (WDM) forums
- the World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs)

National Agricultural Policy Centre (NAPC)

The reform of Syria's agricultural policy is a good example of policy communication being seen as central to the reform process. In the late 1980s, Syria began to move into a period of economic reform, opening up the private sector and establishing closer links with the global economy. With technical assistance from FAO and funding from the Italian Development Cooperation, it also embarked on agricultural policy reform, in two phases. The first phase revolved around institution building and included establishing the NAPC. The second phase focused on building the Centre's capacity, with support from international agencies, to enable it to become a leading player in formulating and implementing national agricultural policy.

Central to this capacity-building phase was the development of a communication strategy (El Hindi and Fiorillo, 2003). With a mandate to increase public awareness of agricultural policies, promote stakeholder involvement in decision-making, and develop international links, the NAPC sees effective communication as essential to its work. The main ingredients of its communication strategy are given in Box 2.

Box 2   NAPC'S COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

- *Disseminating outputs and information from activities*: reports, working papers, training materials, newsletters and the proceedings of conferences and workshops disseminated in print format, on CD-ROM, and via the internet and e-mail

- *Developing international links:* involves participating in international activities and events and exchanging information with international partners

- *Promoting dialogue:* an Agricultural Policy Forum has been set up to promote public awareness of policy issues and to organise workshops to facilitate dialogue among national stakeholders

- *Organizing workshops:* workshops are organized regularly to involve stakeholders in analyzing challenges and seeking solutions


Water Demand Management (WDM) forums

The second example relates to a series of WDM forums on which a major 5-year project, the Regional Water Demand Initiative, referred to as WaDImena (http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-57064-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html), is based. Coordinated by

Box 3 ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE WATER DEMAND MANAGEMENT FORUMS

- Increased awareness and enhanced knowledge about WDM issues among the more than 500 people who attended the forums

- Provided an opportunity to exchange experiences and increase understanding about key WDM issues and determine future needs

- Facilitated the participation of high-level decision-makers in preparing about 30 case studies

- Launched an information dissemination campaign on water resource issues

- Developed a website to promote WDM

- Mobilized enough resources to extend participation in forums on key water issues in the region

- Created good collaborative arrangements with multilateral and bilateral institutions

the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in collaboration with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), WaDimena seeks to facilitate the adoption and implementation of WDM strategies and tools in nine Near East countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen).

The WDM forums took place over 2 years (May 2001 – July 2003). The IDRC had conducted research in the early 1990s showing that WDM strategies and tools constitute an effective approach for alleviating pressure on water resources, and it decided to organize a series of forums to push WDM higher up on the policy-makers' agenda. The achievements of this communication initiative are outlined in Box 3.

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PRSP communication strategies

The third example in this category relates to the communication requirements for Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), a World Bank initiative.

Working with national stakeholders and external development partners, including the World Bank, countries prepare PRSPs that describe their

economic and social policies and programmes to reduce poverty, as a basis for future funding. They are required to implement a communication strategy that ensures that all stakeholders have the opportunity to participate in the process of preparing the PRSP. As noted by Mozammel and Zatlokal (2002):

> Participation, the keystone of PRSPs, relies on accurate, consistent and continuous communication that provokes response and encourages debate and dialogue leading to better understanding, the application of issues to one's own circumstances, and participation in all phases of the PRSP.

Among the Near East countries that have developed a PRSP communication strategy is Yemen.

EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Examples of educational communication initiatives in the Near East are found mainly in the health sector. Most of them are linked to projects that are implemented with support from such organizations as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Academy for Educational Development and Johns Hopkins University. They include initiatives to transfer information and/or encourage behaviour change in such areas as family planning, immunization, HIV/AIDS and, most recently, Highly Pandemic Avian Infuenza (HPAI).

There are some examples from the agriculture and natural resources sectors too. They include a well-known initiative in Syria using theatre to communicate extension messages, which we describe here.

Extension theatre

In 1986, the Training Centre for Agricultural Extension in the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR) was working with FAO and IFAD to train extension workers from 450 extension units around the country. The project ended and it became necessary to find cheaper ways of getting extension messages to farmers.

A communication expert from the Worldview International Foundation came up with the idea of 'extension theatre'. A theatre company was created called the MAAR Permanent Company of the

Itinerant Extension Theatre; it later became part of MAAR's Extension Theatre Unit (http://www. ruralpovertyportal.org/ web/guest/country/voice/tags/syria/theatre).

The company has performed throughout Syria, as well as in Jordan and Sudan. The venues vary from extension unit premises, schools and cultural clubs to the main squares of villages, and the topics relate to agricultural issues and problems affecting farmers, crops and livestock. Extension theatre has now become an integral part of extension activities in Syria.

Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS)

Most current initiatives to transfer knowledge and skills in the agriculture and natural resources sector are characterized by a recognition of the need to use a systems approach, and the concept of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS) underpins many of these initiatives (see Box 4). Interestingly, health communication

Box 4   THE AKIS CONCEPT

FAO and the World Bank (2000) define AKIS as a system that "links people and institutions to promote mutual learning and generate, share and utilize agriculture-related technology, knowledge and information. The system integrates farmers, agricultural educators, researchers and extension-ists to harness knowledge and information from various sources for better farming and improved livelihoods" [as illustrated by the 'knowledge triangle', below].

"Rural people, especially farmers, are at the heart of the knowledge triangle. Education, research and extension are services – public or private – designed to respond to their needs for knowledge with which to improve their productivity, incomes and welfare and manage the natural resources on which they depend in a sustainable way. A shared responsiveness to rural people and an orientation towards their goals ensures synergies in the activities of agricultural educators, researchers and extensionists. Farmers and other rural people are partners within the knowledge system, not simply recipients."

THE KNOWLEDGE TRIANGLE
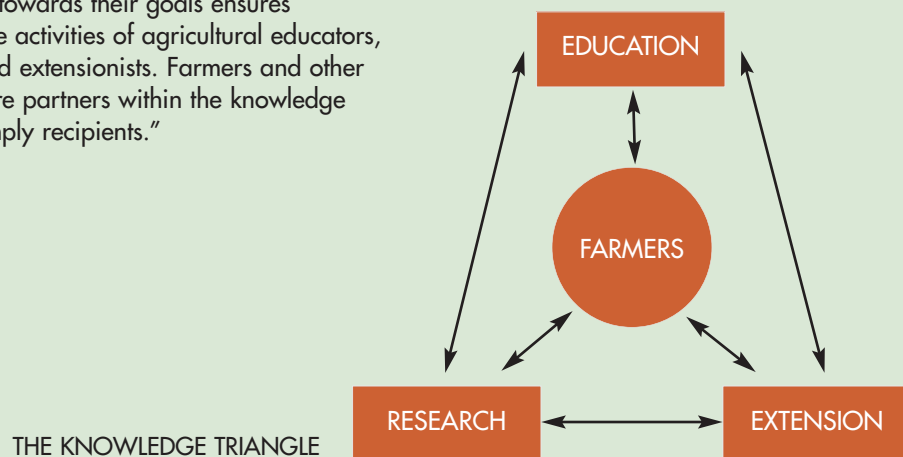
practitioners in the region did not adopt this more holistic approach to knowledge transfer until the HIV/AIDs campaign, when such an approach became necessary and influenced the way subsequent health communication initiatives were structured.

The AKIS notion that all stakeholders should be seen as part of an interconnected system in which knowledge is shared clearly acknowledges communication as a two-way process and the importance of indigenous farmer knowledge within this system. This approach moves us closer to the concept of participatory communication.

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION

The notion of participatory communication appears to be getting off to a slow start in the Near East. El Hadidy (2006) notes that although many organizations are now using the language of 'participation', the ideology is not yet completely internalized, with few truly participatory development initiatives in evidence in the region. She suggests that this might be because 'participation' is seen as a northern concept, or because the term does not translate easily into Arabic (see Box 5).

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For a participatory communication approach to take root in the Near East, sufficient resources need to be allocated to it and initiatives need to be documented. There are few examples in the region of well-resourced and documented initiatives. One illustration is provided in the review of a participatory communication project in Egypt (El Dabi, 2006). Local government personnel were to be trained in participatory planning and communication methodologies to help them involve communities in the planning process for new settlements. The review suggests that the training process itself did not enable the participants to fully grasp the broader impact of participatory communication and that the success of the training programme was measured in terms of the amount of training materials delivered rather than the long-term impact of this new approach to development planning. In the end, the training stopped because of a lack of funds.

Box 5 TRANSLATING THE TERM 'PARTICIPATION'

The Arabic words used most frequently to convey the concept of 'participation' translate into English as 'informing', 'consulting' and 'co-operation', rather than 'sharing' which is a key characteristic determining the level of effective participation (Albee, 1999). However, the Arabic term *musharaka*, which better conveys the notion of 'participation', is now seen more often in development literature.

Similarly in Jordan, a 1-week course in communication (with the emphasis on participatory communication) for agriculture extension workers failed to provide the type of learning environment where the idea of participatory communication could take root. This was partly because the facilitators tried to convey too much information in too little time and failed to spend enough time listening to the views of the individual participants before moving on with the agenda. It could also have be due to the context. No-one on the course was going back to work in a context conducive to participatory communication.

Participatory communication cannot be imposed. It is, in essence, a way of thinking – an approach – that is very difficult to facilitate in an environment characterised by linear one-way communication from government to people, rather than one where dialogue and consultation are allowed to thrive.

Nevertheless, we did find two good examples of participatory communication initiatives in the region where a real effort is being made to integrate this approach into mainstream activities:

- the People, Land and Water (PLaW) programme, supported by IDRC
- the Empowers Partnership programme, supported by the European Union (EU)

People, Land and Water (PLaW) programme

The PLaW programme was launched to examine the sustainable and equitable use of land and water in arid areas in Africa and the Near East (http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-31814-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html#). It focuses on people's use and misuse of resources and emphasizes the need for two-way communication strategies that inform and mobilise local people and enable them to initiate bottom-up communication approaches. There are several PLaW projects in the region; some of them have been described

by Bessette (2004). A good example comes from the Arsaal region in the northeast of Lebanon.

For many decades, a land-use dispute had embroiled the population of the region (http://www.idrc.org.sg/en/ev-59170-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html). Prior to the 1950s, most Arsaalis were nomadic sheep and goat herders. Then fruit growers arrived in the region, taking over pasture

lands for cultivation and drawing on the scarce water resources. Later, stone quarries were started, using up even more pasture land, and the herders were forced into marginal lands. With Lebanon's 15-year civil war and the breakdown of municipal structures, land-use regulation became difficult.

With the country's return to peace came the election of new municipal councils in 1998 and new land-use regulations. Under an IDRC-supported project entitled the Sustainable Improvement of Marginal Lands in Lebanon, the American University of Beirut partnered with a local NGO, the Association for Rural Development in Arsaal, to try to address the land dispute between the herders, fruit growers and quarry owners. They developed a participatory communication strategy based on the Arab *majlis* system, which relies on face-to-face interaction for dispute resolution, and included researchers at the American University of Beirut working with local government to develop sustainable land-use strategies.

Two videos were made of the interactive process for documentation purposes. Unexpectedly, the process of making the videos also served to accelerate the conflict resolution efforts, with people becoming far more candid during the process. Until then, they had felt shut out of the local power structure and lacked the confidence to speak up at the local *maljis,* but no such inhibition was evident when confronted by a camera lens.

The Empowers Partnership programme

The Empowers Partnership ((http://www.project.empowers.info/), a 4-year pro-gramme initiated in 2003, focused on water management issues in Egypt, Jordan and the West Bank/Gaza. It brought together 15 organizations to improve long-term access to water by local communities by supportiing stakeholder-led activities that would empower them in water resources development and management.

Although it did not explicitly stress the importance of participatory communication, the partnership emphasized the need for stakeholder dialogue and organized work-shops to provide water management officials with skills in community dialogue, participatory stakeholder ana-lysis and joint planning. It also encouraged local people to address water issues in their local context and sought to improve dialogue between them and government officials.

The programme ended in 2007, but an Empowers

Thematic Group has been formed to continue the dialogue and sense of partnership created by the project. The Group's aim is to serve as a knowledge network on participatory planning for improved local water governance, and to build on the experiences gained in the implementation of the Empowers project. All of this work is underpinned by a strong participatory communication approach.

COMMUNICATION FOR NETWORKING AND COORDINATION

Good examples of the use of ICTs in agricultural development in the Near East include:

- the Virtual Extension and Research Communication Network (VERCON)

- the Rural and Agricultural Development Communication Network (RADCON), which has built upon the VERCON experience and expanded its application

Both initiatives are in Egypt. A good example of a regional networking initiative is the Knowledge Access in Rural Interconnected Areas Network (KariaNet), which we describe in Part 3 to illustrate how communication initiatives in the Near East have the advantage of working in a language common to the whole region (see Box 6).

The VERCON model

VERCON is a conceptual model based on using internet-based ICTs to facilitate links among research and extension institutions and individuals (Kassem, 2006). The project was launched in 1998 by FAO and Egypt's Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation. Its goal is to improve, through strengthened research-extension links, the agricultural advisory services provided to Egyptian farmers, particularly resource-poor farmers. It has categorized farmers' needs into three groups: production, administrative, and marketing problems (Shaker and Kassem, 2001).

There are now more than 100 VERCON access points in the county (e.g., in extension units, agricultural directorates, research institutions and stations, and Development Support Communication Centres). All these points are connected to the internet through ordinary landlines, and have access to the range of resources that VERCON has developed, including:

- an Agricultural Economic Database
- Extension Bulletins and Agricultural News

16

- the Farmer Problems Tracking System
- Agricultural Expert Systems on strategic crops
- the VERCON Forum for sharing ideas and experiences
- the VERCON Monitoring System
- instant connection to valuable information sources, such as the Central Laboratory for Agricultural Expert Systems (CLAES), the Central Administration for Agricultural extension Services (CAAES) and the Agricultural Extension and Rural Development Research Institute (AERDRI)

The work done by VERCON to date has shown that:

- building communication using existing organizational structures and links has proved to be an effective and efficient approach

- performance-based incentives have contributed to improving the implementation of the VERCON concept

- regular monitoring, and access to monitoring results, has ensured rapid response to user feedback

Despite VERCON's success in enhancing research and extension linkages, an evaluation study revealed that the VERCON project is not yet utilized to its full potential. Although it successfully uses ICTs to link research and extension, the 'last mile' of connectivity – the use of ICTs by farmers themselves – remains a challenge. There needs to be greater emphasis on making content and access more relevant to the rural users in the region.

The RADCON initiative

The promising results of the VERCON project led the Egyptian government, FAO and the Italian Cooperation for Development to support taking the experience to a broader scale. The Rural and Agricultural Development Communication Network (RAD-CON) was set up to engage with a wider range of rural and agricultural development issues and to extend the VERCON network to a wider range of stakeholders, including farmer organizations, youth centres, universities and NGOs. The project was implemented by CLAES in collaboration with AERDRI.

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RADCON fosters a participatory rural communication approach at the community level, combining this with the appropriate use of multimedia and new ICTS. This integrated approach is facilitated by an Information and Communication for Development (ICD) core unit and an extended network of village facilitators that links rural communities and enables them to participate in generating, developing and sharing knowledge through the system.

More than 115 village facilitators (at least one man and one woman per village) from 50 villages have been trained to help farmers access agricultural and rural development information and services. These resources can be accessed both online and offline through an extensive network of experts in research, extension, health, nutrition, women's affairs, environment, community development and rural enterprise.

The project was used to test and adapt FAO's Participatory Rural Communication Appraisal methodology. A comprehensive training-of-trainers' curriculum was developed and implemented, and a media strategy was formulated to raise awareness of the project and share information on new developments. An online communication system and library is now in place to support the face-to-face work of the village facilitators and rural development workers in agriculture, health and other sectors (e.g., new Avian Influenza materials were added very quickly to the RADCON system to support field testing via the facilitators).

RADCON has established itself as a dynamic and innovative approach to the use of ICTs in agricultural development. It has demonstrated the potential of ICTs in development when combined with training, communication and face-to-face facilitation.

Part 3

THE WAY FORWARD

In order to improve and expand current Communication for Development initiatives in the Near East, and develop new ones that are integral to development interventions in the region, it is necessary to be aware of the common factors that link different areas of the region, the challenges in terms of mainstreaming communication strategies, and the opportunities that exist to develop and implement communication strategies.

REGIONAL COMMONALITIES

The countries of the Near East are often linked within different groupings (see Box 1), but whatever the terms used or exactly which countries they include, there are significant common features across the region. These commonalities can make a positive contribution towards developing approaches to Communication for Development.

Language

One of the most important commonalities is that the countries in the Near East share a common written language. This makes it far easier to share communication tools across the region and to implement regional communication programmes such as the PLaW and Empowers programmes (see pages 14-15) and the Knowledge Access in Rural Interconnected Areas Network (KariaNet) initiative (see Box 6).

Water scarcity

The scarcity of water in the region, and the many instances

Box 6 KARIANET

The Knowledge Access in Rural Interconnected Areas Network (KariaNet) initiative (http://karianet.org/en/about) is a multi-stakeholder partnership linking the IDRC, IFAD and IFAD-funded projects in the Near East. It was launched to encourage networking among rural and agricultural development projects through the use of ICTs.

Phase 1 of the project lasted from 2005 to 2008 and involved Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. Two projects per country were identified to constitute the founding core of the network. From each project, Project Knowledge Facilitators were selected to become a 'change champion', tasked with ensuring that local communities would be included in the community of practice that KariaNet seeks to foster.

In Phase 2, KariaNet is being expanded to all IFAD-funded projects throughout the Near East. Its overall goal is to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas, and between rich and poor.

of shared water resources across national boundaries, open up opportunities for regional communication initiatives that might be less workable in regions characterized by much greater diversity in relation to water resources. In our research we found more examples of regional approaches around water issues than we have seen elsewhere.

The WaDImena regional water project described in Part 2 is a good illustration of a regional communication initiative based on common water resources constraints. Another initiative worth noting is the Water Saving in Mediterranean Agriculture (WASAMED) project funded by the EU (http://wasamed.iamb.it/programmi/home.php). Set up to coordinate water management issues in Mediterranean countries, WASAMED is an online thematic network that focuses on disseminating research information and building a knowledge base in these countries on the opportunities for saving water in agriculture.

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A similar network has been established to support the Nile Basin Initiative, which links the countries of the Nile Basin that share the Nile waters (http://www. nilebasin.org/). This initiative was spearheaded by the World Bank and encourages collaboration among the water ministries in 10 countries in reaching water sharing agreements.

Socio-cultural dynamics

The participants in the Cairo workshop in 2006, made it clear that although the current patterns of governance in the Near East may not be conducive to the participatory communication approach, the socio-cultural norms of the populations embed a participatory approach in their culture. This type of collective thinking and work ethic is illustrated by the Arsaal experience, which involved the use of the Arab *majlis* system (see pages 14-15) and by the informal information network established by *qat* famers in Yemen (see Box 7).

This cultural inclination towards participatory communication could be a basis for partnerships between civil society and governments in the region. Governments could help civil society organizations to facilitate the participatory process, while government units focused on the policy and information functions of communication. This pluralistic approach to development work is gradually gaining ground in the region.

An example of this more pluralistic approach is the work currently being undertaken to reform agricultural extension services using a multi-stakeholder approach for exten-

Box 7 INFORMAL AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION NETWORKING

A study was conducted in Yemen on the development and dissemination of agricultural technologies among *qat* farmers (Al-Marwani, 2006). The study looked at how, in the absence of any formal institutions, these farmers conducted technological research amongst themselves and set up an information network to share their findings.

The farmers seek and exchange information from numerous sources about new technologies and local practices in *qat* production, and about technologies applied to other crops that could be profitably adapted and applied to *qat* production. They use informal communication channels that are simple, easily accessible and effective because the farmers are more confident in the information being conveyed, as it comes form other farmers, than in information carried by formal communication channels. Accounts from the farmers confirmed that they apply the information from these channels directly, which is seldom the case with information disseminated by formal organizations.

Informal channels such as these could be used for other crops by extension and advisory services to increase the effectiveness of formal channels. The study highlights the need for communication projects to research what information channels people use and trust.

sion service delivery. To be effective, this type of approach will require a closer working relationship between government, civil society and farmer groups, leading to a more participatory approach to both communication and development.

CHALLENGES

There are several challenges facing efforts to build relevant and comprehensive Communication for Development strategies and integrate them effectively into development interventions in the Near East. The main ones are outlined here.

Regional governance structures and policies

The participants in the Cairo workshop emphasized the strength of the participatory approach in many aspects of life in Near Eastern countries, but noted that the regional governance model tends to be top-down rather than participatory.

The need for a coherent policy approach that could support the implementation of Communication for Development initiatives, at both national and regional level, was stressed. Key to this is capacity development and the strengthening of existing structures at both policy and practice level.

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Limited understanding of development communication among decision-makers

In a survey of decision-makers in developing countries, it emerged that in spite of some 30 years of efforts by communication practitioners, most people in key decision-making positions in governments and donor agencies still lacked a clear idea of what development communication is or what it is for (Ramirez and Quarry, 2004). Although decision-makers understand the need for communication, they tend to see it in terms of communication for public relations and disseminating information – that is, the 'telling' rather than the 'listening' form of communication.

The Near East seems to be no exception. There appears to be a widespread lack of knowledge, understanding or even interest by decision-makers of the importance of development communication. In the few instances where it is partly understood, communication initiatives often fall short of achieving the impact that is possible with good research-based communication planning.

Limited understanding of development communication among project managers

Although some project managers in the Near East are becoming more interested in integrating communication strategies into their development projects, most of them do not realize the importance of:

■ designing the communication strategy on the basis of good planning and thorough research on the knowledge, attitudes and practices of the target audiences

■ implementing the strategy at the outset of the project

The participatory communication project in Egypt reviewed by El Dabi (2006) is an illustration of this problem (see page 13).

Limited communication capacity development and networking opportunities

The Cairo workshop provided ample evidence that although there are many Communication for Development practitioners working in the Near East, most of them

are working in isolation. The workshop participants commented that most initiatives are led by individuals, and when the project ends or the individual moves on, the initiative ends and the vision is lost.

They also commented on the lack of networking among communication practitioners in the region, exacerbated by the absence of any institutional presence that could take the lead in bringing practitioners together to share experiences and develop a common approach. There are no training centres, for example, where training in Communication for Development is offered to students.

Gender imbalance

The difficulty of including those people who are traditionally excluded from knowledge sharing systems remains a common development challenge. Only through the inclusion of the most marginalized can a communication initiative contribute effectively to improving livelihoods.

Women play a pivotal role in agriculture, food security and natural resource management in the Near East, and unless this is recognized and addressed when developing communication initiatives, these initiatives are unlikely to succeed. It requires, for example, specialized training, and perhaps segregated communication teams of men and women. Men need to be made aware of the power dynamics of gender inequality and the importance of gender-sensitive communication (Connell, 2003; Ruxton, 2003).

Key opportunities for mainstreaming gender in development communication lie in holding governments to their commitments, as noted by BouSalah (2006). At the Cairo workshop, emphasis was put on the role of governments in creating a favourable environment for developing gender-sensitive initiatives.

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OPPORTUNITIES

There are many factors that present opportunities for developing and implementing effective development communication initiatives in the Near East.

Experience in health communication

As noted earlier, considerable experience has been built up in health communication in the region (see page 11). With the growing similarities between the approaches used for health

communication and those used in agriculture and natural resources, it would be worth drawing on the experience that does exist to build a critical base of trained communication professionals in these and other development sectors.

Much of the experience in health communication derives from the need to make people aware of HIV/AIDS issues and, more recently, Highly Pandemic Avian Influenza (HPAI), commonly known as Avian Flu. The AIDS pandemic has highlighted the importance of communication; with the rush to find ways of slowing down the epidemic, a host of new communication models and professionals have appeared, offering a foundation on which to strengthen regional capacity in development communication. The threat from Avian Flu opens up opportunities for joint projects and increased understanding of the importance and power of communication.

Growth in ICTs and their application

There is increasing evidence that information and communication technologies (ICTs), including computers, the internet and mobile phones, can greatly help the poor improve their situation if the context in which they live and work is adequately considered in communication initiatives.

A pilot programme of Grameen Phone, a commercial operation providing mobile phone services in urban and rural areas of Bangladesh, has shown how setting up a simple system to give village women access to a mobile phone has transformed their ability to access markets, obtain commodity price information and network with each other (http://www.telecommons.com/villagephone/finalreport.pdf). Communication strategies of this nature are entirely possible in the Near East.

Reviewing and adapting past and current efforts

The notion of participatory development approaches is not new to the region. Nor is the notion of participatory communication strategies in development interventions, as we saw in Part 2. The opportunity exists, therefore, to draw on this experience.

It would be worth, for example, conducting a retrospective review of Communication for Development in the region to understand what has worked and what has not. In addition, although it is not possible to totally replicate an effective communication initiative in a different context, it should be possible to extrapolate key experiences and ideas and adapt them to a new situation. This is where networking among communication professionals in the Near East to exchange ideas on communication initiatives would bring great dividends, using such channels as the Communication for Development – Near East Platform, mentioned on page 7 Platform (http://www.comdev-neareast.org/web/main.php).

Climate change adaptation

Recent projections indicate that the Near East will be among the regions most vulnerable to climate change (NERC, 2008). Agri-culture productivity will be affected by high temperatures, drought, floods and soil degradation, posing threats to food security in many countries. Work on climate change adaptation is being undertaken in the region in order to build resilience, reduce negative impacts and sustainably manage natural resources. This requires multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder action and a process of social learning for adaptive livelihoods (FAO, 2009).

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Box 8   The Communication for Sustainable Development Initiative (CSDI)

In collaboration with the Italian Ministry of the Environment and Territory, FAO has launched the Communication for Sustainable Development Initiative (CSDI) to apply communication strategies to climate change adaptation, sustainable natural resources management and food security. CSDI aims to implement communication programmes and services in selected countries, and to make available suitable Communication for Development methods and tools globally through partnerships and knowledge networks. The CSDI strategy focuses on three main integrated components:

■ **Normative work:** Experiences and lessons about the use of Communication for Development methods and tools in fields such as climate change adaptation, natural resources management and disaster risk reduction are being systematized and made available globally through reports, publications and training materials

■ **Capacity building:** Networking and partnership is a strategic component of the CSDI strategy. Special attention is being paid to enhancing links between normative and field work, and strengthening cooperation among stakeholders at all levels. A series of learning platforms are being supported in various regions in collaboration with institutions and communication and environmental networks, such as the Communication for Development – Near East Platform

■ **Technical assistance:** CSDI action at the field level focuses on supporting selected projects in:
  - Bangladesh (Communication for Development support for livelihood adaptation to climate change)
  - Bolivia (support for a national communication plan for agricultural innovation and sustainable natural resources management)
  - Caribbean (support for a regional Communication for Development facility for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation)
  - Democratic Republic of Congo (support for technology innovation and climate change adaptation)

Communication clearly has a central role in climate change adaptation efforts – to share knowledge, foster stakeholder dialogue and bring about effective concerted action. Models are being developed for this (e.g., the one described in Box 8), giving opportunities for communication professionals in the Near East to devise initiatives in climate change adaptation and food security, as well as in other development areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study of Communication for Development initiatives in the Near East has highlighted three main areas that we need to address to improve and increase such initiatives and ensure that they become embedded in development interventions in the region.

Institutional support

It is important to identify key institutions that could help push the development communication agenda in the region. These could include FAO, IDRC, UNICEF, the Near East Foundation and national and other universities, such as the American University of Beirut, the American University of Cairo and the Canadian University of Cairo.

Representatives from these institutions could be brought together in a workshop to discuss how to enhance the application of Communication for Development in the region.

National reviews

Research should be undertaken, perhaps by universities, to assess who is doing what in each country with regard to development communication. It could be part of a Masters or PhD thesis for students in national universities in each country.

This could be followed by national and regional workshops to assess the findings and discuss the way ahead (this links into the suggestion made earlier of reviewing past and current development communication experiences).

Capacity building

There is a pressing need to develop a cadre of trained communication practitioners in all regions (Quarry and Ramirez, 2007). This is as true of the Near East as anywhere else. The Cairo workshop highlighted the need for capacity development at all levels

and for specialized training programmes in Communication for Development in the region.

Universities and development institutions need to step in and address this gap. Socio-cultural similarities and the shared language provide a good basis for developing regional training programmes and networking opportunities, such as FAO's Communication for Development portal for the region (see page 7).

Linking into this topic of developing a cadre of trained practitioners in the region, we cite a view expressed in the e-forum on FAO's Communication for Development regional portal, held in preparation for the Cairo workshop:

> It is absolutely necessary to have a 'code' that prohibits the planning or implementation of communication programmes without using the servic-es of communication 'architects' (I mean experts), hence the need for developing and 'producing' such people in our region. On the basis of experience in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries, I am sure that the long-term planning for this goal will prove to be crucial in advancing the cause of planning and implementing effective development commu-nication activities.
>
> *Farag El Kamel,*
> *e-forum on Communication for Development in the Near East,*
> *27 April – 7 May, 2006*

****

We hope that this booklet has provided a useful overview to what is actually happen-ing in Communication for Development in the Near East and that, by raising issues and making suggestions for the way forward, it will trigger more in-depth analyses of the issues and encourage more documentation and sharing of experiences, and thus strengthen Communication for Development in the region.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AERDRI	Agricultural Extension and Rural Development Research Institute
AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems
CAAES	Central Administration for Agricultural extension Services
CBO	community-based organization
CDS	Consolidated Development Services
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CLAES	Central Laboratory of Agricultural Expert Systems
CSDI	Communication for Sustainable Development Initiative
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization for the United Nations
GDP	gross domestic product
HPAI	Highly Pandemic Avian Influenza
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
KARIANET	Knowledge Access in Rural Interconnected Areas Network
MAAR	Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform
NAPC	National Agricultural Policy Centre
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
NGO	non-governmental organization
PLaW	People, Land and Water Programme
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RADCON	Rural and Agricultural Development Communication Network
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VERCON	Virtual Extension and Research Communication Network
WaDImena	Regional Water Demand Initiative
WASAMED	Water Saving in Mediterranean Agriculture
WDM	Water Development Management

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

Page 1   A session during the Technical Consultation on Communication for Development, held in Cairo, Egypt in June 2006 *(Emrys Shoemacher)*

Page 4   A woman gathering her harvest of broad beans. Project on Experiments and Demonstration of the Production of Selected Tree Crops, Forage and Livestock, Tunis, Tunisia *(FAO/Florita Botts)*

Page 7   Discussion between an extension agent and a farmer. Reforestation Institute, Tunis, Tunisia *(FAO/Florita Botts)*

Page 8   Variety and Seed Industry Development Project, Afghanistan *(FAO/Giulio Napolitano)*

Page 9   Farmers working in the field, Egypt *(RADCON project)*

Page 10   A lesson in an open-air school, Sudan *(FAO/F. McDougall)*

Page 11   Women attending a literacy course in Qusiva village, Syria, where the literacy rate among women is only 20% *(IFAD/ Jon Spaull)*

Page 13   Training session *(RADCON project)*

Page 14   Workers constructing a new dam in southern Tunisia *(FAO/Florita Botts)*

Page 15   Women successfully growing vegetables in the desert, Mauritania *(FAO/Jeanette Van Acker)*

Page 16   ICT training, Egypt *(RADCON project)*

Page 17   Women attending ICT training, Egypt *(RADCON project)*

Page 20   Cracked earth during drought in an area threatened by desertification, Mauritania *(FAO/Ivo Balderi)*

Page 22   A man drawing water to irrigate a vegetable garden in the city of Nouakchott, Mauritania *(T. Fenyes)*

Page 23   A woman carrying forage, Yemen *(RADCON project)*

Page 25   Farmers harvesting their first crop of Dutch potatoes, introduced experimentally to the FAO farm at Makroug near Ibb in the highlands, Yemen *(FAO/Franco Mattioli)*

The main objective of this booklet is to provide an overview of current initiatives and projects in the Near East focusing on Communication for Development applied to natural resources management and agriculture in the region, assess the main challenges, and identify links and opportunities to strengthen their collaboration and further advance Communication for Development in the region.

CSDI
Communication for
Sustainable Development
Initiative