

****MARK YOUR CALENDARS****
Communication for Social Change Forum
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The definition and practice of social communication - or communication for social change - has evolved over the years. In the past, communication theories assumed that by giving people the right information, often using the cheapest means of mass communication, they would make the right decisions. The theory was top-down and centralized, in limited circumstances, it worked.

As values associated with development change, and researchers and practitioners learn more about the relationship between communication and development, theories and practices evolve. A dominant trend today is participatory development that places the skills, tools and agenda itself in the hands of the marginalized in order to help them better understand and change their situation.

International development initiatives have also begun to harness the power of new information communication technologies (ICTs) to improve the effectiveness and impact of development work. Some initiatives have strived to put technology and skills in the hands of the marginalised. However, many people argue that due to the cost, ICTs have created a world of information "haves" and "have-nots", thus enforcing traditional power hierarchies. Still, others believe that ICTs can be participatory. The important issue of ICTs will be discussed from various perspectives at the upcoming United Nations World Summit on Information Society during its first phase in 2003 and its second phase in 2005.

Nevertheless, most people agree that an innovative and effective participatory communication strategy is now crucial for bringing about social change. The new model that has evolved is decentralized, pluralistic and democratic; it seeks to empower rather than persuade people; it fosters debate among and between citizens, among and between communities, and between people and government. It envisages increasingly horizontal communication allowing people to communicate with each other easily and inexpensively. It also involves the steady disintegration of traditional, monolithic vertical lines of communication where government owned radio and television stations control the flow of information and opinion.

Through channels such as community radio, video collectives, popular theatre, and ICTs, social change gains strength. Here are some South Asia examples:

- In Nepal, villagers established a low-power radio station for under \$3,000. Not only is the radio proving to be a remarkable source of local information, education and entertainment, it is also helping to restore pride and the use of local dialect among young people.

- When women students at a Bangladesh university began a campaign against campus rape, websites became a principal tool for advocacy. At its peak, the site was getting over 5000 hits per day. Articles were sent to the newspapers but parts of the story were edited out, so the women began to publish the censored sections on line. Pressure that was exerted internationally and nationally added to student protests forced the establishment to conduct an inquiry.
- Across South Asia, television broadcasters air the “Meena” Series, a UNICEF-sponsored animated cartoon about a little girl and her family who stand up to male dominance and gender inequities. Senior government officials help promote the series and in some countries school children discuss the episodes in class with their teachers. Slowly, attitudes begin to change.

Finally, the monitoring and evaluation of social communications strategies is a neglected but very important element of social communications. Effectively gauging the outcome of a communication initiative - how the community acted or how attitudes changed - can provide invaluable information to development organisations and governments. Researchers and practitioners continue to grapple with the challenges of measuring the impact of social communication.

Through *Communication for Social Change*, SAP Canada will bring resource people from South Asia together with Canadian NGOs, academics, government, private sector and civil society representatives. Using South Asian and Canadian examples the forum will:

- Frame the current theories of communication for social change
- Discuss the practice of these theories from lessons in the field
- Examine emerging trends in monitoring and evaluation
- Explore the potential and challenges for new technologies such as ICTs in South Asia

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