

The No-Nonsense *guide to* Media, the Right to Information and Poverty Reduction

*Invisibility in public communication 'is a key dimension of the powerlessness of people living in poverty and is closely correlated with the extreme inequalities that underlie human development failures. Strengthening the voices of people living in poverty improves understandings and actions aimed at addressing poverty, injustice, and inequality and can inform and influence public agendas locally, nationally and internationally.'*¹ *What are the problems and how are people's voices being strengthened?*

People living in poverty tend to be socially excluded and to belong to politically marginalized groups. They often lack the information and knowledge that would enable them to take part in social and political decision-making, with the result that their needs are neglected. Accordingly, ignorance of rights and freedoms is both a cause and a consequence of poverty.

In a vicious circle, excluded people are more likely to fall into poverty and the poorer they become, the more vulnerable they are to social exclusion and political marginalization. Information and knowledge are important tools in the struggle to break out of that circle as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has pointed out:

*'The right to information and other political rights and freedoms are essential in the context of poverty reduction strategies, both from a substantive and from a procedural point of view. As substantive human rights, the right to vote, equal access to public service, and freedom of expression and association empower the poor to overcome the capability failures that are constitutive of poverty. As procedural rights, they enable the poor to participate actively in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies.'*²

Information is crucial to social change

People need information to develop their potential to

the fullest and to realise the full range of their human rights. In 1946, recognition of this fact led the fledgling United Nations to resolve that, 'Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and the touchstone for all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated.'

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) went further to state that, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' This formulation places the right to access information and knowledge firmly within the body of universal human rights law.

The right to access information and knowledge underpins all other human rights. For example, the right to food often relies on the right to information. In India, people have used access laws to find out about their ration entitlements, to expose the fraudulent distribution of food grains, to challenge corruption, and to guarantee schooling for their children.

The right to information lies at the heart of the human rights system precisely because it enables citizens to claim and exercise their rights, assess when their rights are at risk, and determine who is responsible for any violations.

This fact has been underlined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP):

*'Effective anti-poverty programmes require accurate information on problems hindering development to be in the public domain. Meaningful debates also need to take place around the policies designed to tackle the problems of poverty. Information can empower poor communities to battle the circumstances in which they find themselves and help balance the unequal power dynamic that exists between people marginalized through poverty and their governments. This transparent approach to working also helps poor communities to be visible on the political map so that their interests can be advanced. The right to information is, therefore, central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.'*³



Women taking part in an adult literacy programme at a remote village in West Bengal, India. This image by Sudipto Das, who works for *The Times of India*, was one of the photos commended in WACC's Photo Competition 2010. See <http://www.waccglobal.org/component/content/article/2309:wacc-photo-competition-winners-announced.html>

Gender and poverty issues

When it comes to communication poverty, women are likely to be doubly disadvantaged. Poverty itself is 'gendered' because women and men experience poverty differently – and unequally – and they become poor through different, though related, processes. There is overwhelming evidence that women and girls are more disadvantaged than men and boys, both across societies and among the poor.

Women bear a disproportionate burden of the world's poverty. Statistics indicate that women are more likely than men to be poor and at risk of hunger because of the systematic discrimination they face in education, health care, employment and control of assets. Poverty implications are widespread for women, leaving many without even basic rights such as access to clean drinking water, sanitation, medical care and decent employment. Being poor can also mean they have little protection from violence and have no voice in decision-making.

The recent global financial crisis is likely to affect women particularly severely. In many developing countries where women work in export-led factories,

or in countries where migrant women workers are the backbone of service industries, women's jobs have taken the greatest hit. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the economic downturn led to 22 million more unemployed women in 2009, jeopardizing the gains made in the last few decades in women's empowerment.

In many countries, however, the impact goes far beyond the loss of formal jobs as the majority of women are concentrated in the informal sector, for example as petty traders and domestic workers in cities, and their numbers are not reflected in official (un)employment statistics. Economic policies and institutions to a significant extent still fail to adequately address gross gender inequities and inequalities, continuing to support gender-blind tax, budget systems and trade regimes. Gender-blind policy-making coupled with too few seats for women at the tables where economic decisions are made result in limited opportunities for women to influence policy.

Given that 'only 24% of the people heard or read about in print, radio and television news are female',⁴ the perspectives of women continue to be

ignored in crucial areas of development and social justice.

Role of mass media

In an early effort to take seriously the issue of media coverage of poverty, the NGO Panos London – part of the worldwide Panos Network of independent institutes working to ensure that information is used effectively to foster debate, pluralism and democracy – pointed out that media leaders and media support organisations should:

- Exploit the opportunities for making stronger public interest coverage of issues relevant to poverty reduction an integral part of key media reporting interests (such as politics, business and economics, coverage of parliaments and budgets, governance, corruption, crime).
- Provide professional incentives and practical support for editors and journalists to undertake topical story research and develop the knowledge, critical skills and journalistic expertise needed to strengthen public interest coverage of issues relevant to poverty reduction.
- Take advantage of the increased range of actors and organisations producing information relevant to poverty reduction policy issues, encouraging journalists to diversify their information sources and contacts beyond state and government institutions and include civil society organisations at different levels, policy research bodies and parliamentarians.
- Work with governments, international donors and media support organisations to secure strategic support for stronger journalist training, as well as the financing of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of media content on key public policy issues such as poverty reduction.
- Work with editors to assess existing information and discuss their views of different public audiences' interests in coverage of issues of topical relevance to poverty reduction, where necessary considering specific public surveys and securing advice and resources from national and international support institutions.
- Consider and develop strategic policy proposals for the media, whether led from within the sector or as part of advocacy of stronger public policies on the media, pressing governments for appropriate independent regulatory frameworks and supportive media laws and reforms.
- Develop specific media development proposals relevant to public interest coverage of public policy issues such as poverty reduction, presenting them to governments, donors and outside media support organisations as they introduce initiatives and

A FEW SCANT FACTS

- Almost half the world — over 3 billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day.
- The GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (567 million people) is less than the wealth of the world's 7 richest people combined.
- Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.
- Less than one per cent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn't happen.
- 1 billion children live in poverty (1 in 2 children in the world). 640 million live without adequate shelter, 400 million have no access to safe water, 270 million have no access to health services.
- 10.6 million died in 2003 before they reached the age of 5 (or roughly 29,000 children per day).

Source: <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/2/causes-of-poverty>

finance programmes aimed at stronger policies and practical support for the sector.⁵

Citizens' media can help

In today's world, new information and communication technologies have become the basis of citizen participation. There are many forms of citizen-produced media (including blogs, vlogs, podcasts, digital storytelling, participatory video and much more) all of which can be distributed via television, radio, Internet, email, and mobile phones.

Citizens' media have blossomed with the advent of technological tools and systems that facilitate production and distribution of media. Of these technologies, none has advanced citizen media more than the Internet, which has enabled people to respond to the mass media's neglect of public interest, their partisan portrayal of news and world events, and the challenges posed by overt or covert censorship.

Sharing information and knowledge expands people's horizons, allowing them to make informed choices and strengthening their ability to demand their rights. Ensuring access to information and knowledge empowers poor people to tackle the deep inequalities

of power and voice that entrench poverty around the world. Citizens' media can play a vital role.

As the editors of a recent issue of *Development in Practice* note:

'As longer-term processes of social and cultural construction, citizens' media are part of a process of redefining dominant norms and power relations that marginalise and exclude people. Through having the capacities, the ownership and control to manage their own media, people can reshape and create the social, cultural, and political spaces in which their voices find expression. This gives meaning and legitimacy to diverse expressions of citizenship, adding depth and value to formal mechanisms of voice and representation.'⁶

The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) has long advocated recognizing and building on communication rights as integral to achieving social justice. The following examples from Mexico, Fiji, Argentina, and Egypt come from recent project partnerships under WACC's programme 'Communication and Poverty'.

Ecological challenges in Mexico

Since its creation in 1995, the NGO Asociación Ecológica Santo Tomás [<http://www.aestomas.org>] has used audiovisuals to advocate defence of natural resources in Mexico's south-east region. In particular it has been active in Chontalpa-Costa region and the state of Tabasco. The group received support from WACC to purchase equipment and materials to enable it to produce two documentaries on the environmental impact of oil digging in the region and of generating electricity. The real impact of these activities on local people – most of whom are poor – is hardly ever mentioned in Mexico's mainstream media.

Few citizenship communication and information initiatives exist in south-east Mexico, making the situation worse. In a relatively short span of time, Asociación Ecológica Santo Tomás has created an alternative space for information using audio and video media. The group now has a multimedia lab which allows it to open up discussion among citizens seeking to promote alternative solutions to their problems, solutions that benefit those living in poverty in the region rather than benefitting private interests.

Linking up in Fiji

Created in 1990 as a response to increasing religious and racial strife, poverty and unemployment in Fiji, the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy [<http://www.ecrea.org.fj>] has been advocating for a just society in which the rights and dignity

'Strategic communication is much more than merely informing citizens about Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS). Rather, it is the active seeking of the perspectives and contributions of citizens so that they can help to shape policy.

It also means ensuring that mechanisms are in place for a two-way flow of information and ideas between the government and the citizenry as well as making deliberate efforts to build consensus amongst stakeholders about the development strategy the nation wishes to pursue.

Done properly, strategic communication contributes to the effectiveness of PRS as follows:

- It creates open and inclusive national dialogue on policy options. This leads to greater and informed participation in policymaking by significant segments of the population. The result is increased support and commitment for the strategy that is agreed.
- It manages expectations. Rather than a revolution of unrealistic hopes it gives the people a balanced sense of what policy options can deliver. This helps governments.
- It promotes transparency and accountability. Open and inclusive dialogue richly informed by a full airing of the facts helps citizens to hold governments to account. They can measure progress against promises more easily.
- It establishes and maintains momentum. This is because once vast multitudes are engaged in the process of working out the strategy to be pursued the energies of the nation are more easily unleashed; and once unleashed it is almost impossible to switch off.
- It creates or deepens a public culture of citizen-government dialogue. This is already evident in several PRS implementing countries, as this study affirms. Such a culture has enormous benefits all round for the development agenda.'

Source: *With the Support of Multitudes: Using strategic communication to fight poverty through PRSPs*, by Masud Mozammel and Sina Odugbemi. London: DFID (2005) p. 9.

of all are respected and protected. Increasingly one of ECREA's concerns has been the accessibility of new information and communication technologies to the people of Fiji, and in particular to people and communities living in poverty.

With WACC's support ECREA undertook a programme to provide training in and access to new technologies in rural and suburban areas as a way to support poverty alleviation efforts and community development. As a result, five rural communities are now connected to the People's Community Network, an organization formed by people living in informal settlements around Lami, Suva and Nausori. The different communities have discovered how they can link telecentres with their own needs and how telecentres can help communities address local issues and make their voices heard by service providers as well as government departments.

Social mobilization in Argentina

The grassroots social organisations in Argentina had the commitment and capacity to speak publicly about poverty and inequality in the country, yet they lacked tools in order to construct significant and relevant arguments as well as channels that allowed them to amplify their public presence. Social fragmentation following deep economic and political crises in the country demanded a common language and political discourse which facilitated the creation of networks of social actors able to give direction to these processes.

WACC partnered with the NGO Centro Nueva Tierra [<http://www.nuevatierra.org.ar>] to promote community social mobilization around issues of inequality and the distribution of wealth and to encourage better coverage (both in terms of quantity and quality) of poverty in the mass media. The project has helped to strengthen advocacy and participation in public policy-making which support and guarantee democracy, national development, redistribution of wealth and the exercise of citizens' rights.

Téléciné International (TCI), Egypt

In the Middle East/North Africa region, broadcast media have a significant impact even amongst the poorest of the poor and in areas with high levels of illiteracy, television and video are relevant tools for education. Téléciné International [<http://www.telecine.org>] an NGO that produces television programmes with social messages targeting children, young people and families region produced two audiovisual education kits on issues of development in order to address poverty. *The Right to Liberty, a Voice* addressed participation and decision-making in the community, mobilizing for change, and creating networks and groups. *The Right to Equality* tackled gender issues and explored the link

between gender and poverty while including issues related to domestic violence and sexual harassment.

A number of NGOs in Egypt are now making use of the audiovisuals as a way to start discussion among community and grassroots groups. The project also helped to break the silence around poverty and gender rights in a male dominant society and is a pioneer project in using 'edutainment'.

Citizens' media for development⁷

Ordinarily, citizens' media projects tend to focus on one of a few common goals, like giving voice to marginalized people, or freedom of speech, or promoting government transparency. These are important goals, but they are more concerned with politics than development. Citizens' media can also benefit development projects as the following examples illustrate:

The Nomad Green project in Mongolia [<http://en.nomadgreen.org/>] trains citizens to use social media to report on environmental issues using blogs, mapping, videos, and podcasts. Nomad Green now has dozen of authors writing about environmental issues in the country, and a map where citizens can report environmental problems. They also translate many of their articles into English, Chinese, and other languages – because environmental problems are shared across country borders.

In the Congo, the organization AIDS Rights Congo [<http://aidsrightscongo.org/>] uses social media like videos and blogs to document the stories of people affected by AIDS and then employs these materials as part of an effort to educate others about the disease and advocate for their rights.

In Medellin, Colombia, activists combined blogging workshops for youth with a public outreach program at their local libraries. The result is a project called HiperBarrio [<http://hiperbarrio.org/>] which combines library time with a programme that allows participants – many of whom come from poor neighbourhoods rife with violence – to blog about their lives.

The NGO Bosco Uganda [<http://boscouganda.com/>] believes that the Internet can provide a way to help communities recover from conflict. This project provides Internally Displaced Person camps in Northern Uganda with internet connections and training, using technology especially suited to such rural communities: solar-powered computers connected to long-range wireless networks.

Listening to the voices of the poor

In its landmark report *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*, the World Bank used participatory and qualitative research methods to present 'very directly, through poor people's own voices, the realities of their

lives.’ It noted that:

‘Over and over again, poor people mention their isolation from information; information about programs of assistance, their rights, job contacts, how banks work; government plans that affect their lives directly... In addition to information dissemination through mass media, poor people’s connectivity to each other and to sources of information can be greatly enhanced through access to communication and information technology. Rural information technology centers, cellular telephones and Internet access can change poor people’s negotiating power even while deep structural inequities exist.’⁸

Access to information and communication technologies, and the right to information and knowledge, are aspects of communication rights – those rights that strengthen the capacity of people and communities to use communication and media to pursue their goals in the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres.

Poverty reduction demands an active alliance between those who advocate and promote communication rights, those who encourage citizens’ and community-based media, and – crucially – people living in poverty. ■

Notes

1. ‘Communication poverty: A rights-based approach’, by Lavinia Mohr. In *Media Development* 1/2008, pp. 8-11.
2. *Principles and Guidelines for a Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies*. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Geneva, 2006: 215.
3. *Right to Information Practical Guidance Note*. Bureau for Development Policy, Democratic Governance Group, UNDP, 2004.
4. Who makes the news? Global Media Monitoring Project 2010. WACC. www.whomakesthenews.org
5. Making poverty the story - Time to involve the media in poverty reduction. London: Panos, 2005 pp. 60-61. <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=284>
6. ‘Citizens’ media and communication’, by Jethro Pettit, Juan Francisco Salazar, and Alfonso Gumucio Dagron. In *Development in Practice*, Vol. 19, Nos.

4-5, June 2009, p. 451.

7. See: <http://www.globalcitizencorps.org/blog/2010/05/role-citizen-media-development-work>
8. *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*, by Deepa Narayan, Robert Chambers, Meera K. Shah, Patti Petesch. World Bank. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 274.

This No-Nonsense Guide is a resource compiled by Philip Lee and published by the World Association for Christian Communication (2010).

The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC)

promotes communication for social change. It believes that communication is a basic human right that defines people’s common humanity, strengthens cultures, enables participation, and creates community.

WACC’s key concerns are media diversity, equal and affordable access to communication and knowledge, media and gender justice, and the relationship between communication and power. It tackles these through advocacy, education, training, and the creation and sharing of knowledge.

WACC is responsible for the Centre for Communication Rights portal – a source of documents and materials about all aspects of communication rights.

www.centreforcommunicationrights.org

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WACC



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