

How Communication Rights Might Contribute to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals

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Abstract

This chapter makes a case for recognizing, implementing, and building on communication rights in order to create ‘enabling environments’ conducive to at least partially achieving the Millennium Development Goals. By exercising their communication rights, people are empowered to identify, analyse, dialogue, and tackle the structural, political, economic, and cultural obstacles to improving their lives. The aim is to make possible and guarantee participation by every segment and sector of society so that people can act collectively, effectively, and justly. This requires recognizing and strengthening communication rights as essential to building people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented societies, to countering the discrimination, exclusion and isolation of different marginalised and vulnerable groups and communities, and to affirming the inherent dignity, equality, and inalienable rights of all people.

Keywords: Communication rights; Millennium Development Goals; Participatory communication; Social justice.

Introduction

While the evolution of communication rights has been reasonably well documented and critiqued (Harms & Richstad & Kie, 1977; Girard & Ó Siochrú, 2003; Lee, 2004; CRIS Campaign, 2005; Mueller & Kuerbis & Pagé, 2007) the role they might play in facilitating the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has been largely overlooked. As one commentator laments:

Although information and media industries are some of the largest and most dynamic worldwide, commerce and politics invest astronomical amounts on “communication”, and information networks have become the backbone of a globalized world, communication is not mentioned in the MDGs . . . Furthermore, this absence is particularly noticeable considering that, for decades, international organizations alongside policymakers, scholars, activists and professionals have encouraged the global community to rally behind fundamental communication goals such as the democratization of means of expression, and the building and sustaining of tolerant and pluralistic societies.

(Waisbord, 2006, p. 3)

Recent ferment in the field of communication for social change, whose strategies and practices are increasingly understood to take place in a context “of ever-changing developments in the field; variable forms of consciousness; political, social, and economic exigencies; and challenging interpretations of that reality” (Thomas, 2001, p. 251), underline the urgency of listening to the voices of, and working closely with, local groups and communities in efforts to tackle structural poverty and obstacles to development. Equally perplexing was the underplaying of ‘communication’ in favour of ‘information and news’ at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and of any meaningful exploration of how to build *communication* societies: “Ironically, as our capacity to process and distribute information and knowledge expands and improves, our capacity to communicate and to converse diminishes” (Hamelink, 2002, p. 8).

Communication rights derive from human rights and their “habitat” is social justice and participatory development. If communication rights are to mean anything, they must have practical application at the level of individuals and communities in order to “build an environment in which people are better equipped to receive messages, to understand and respond to them, and to communicate critically, competently and creatively” (CRIS Campaign, 2005, p. 24). Unless communication rights imbue initiatives aimed at development and social change – globally, regionally, nationally and locally – such efforts, however wholehearted, will only ever be partly effective.

In this respect it is worth recalling what communication for development is all about, before reviewing the Millennium Development Goals and how recognizing and building on communication rights might help achieve them. Scholars are generally agreed that early models of imposed (top-down) modernization and development are being abandoned in favour of consultation, participation and self-determination. Radical changes in thinking over the past fifty years have been summarized in terms of a deeper understanding of:

- The nature of communication, emphasizing process and the significance of that process;
- Communication as a two-way event, providing and disseminating information for which there is an expressed need;
- Culture as a normative context;
- Participatory democracy, greater literacy and increased capacity to handle and use communication technologies;
- Imbalances in communication resources and the digital divide, which can only be addressed in terms of power;
- Globalization and cultural hybridity;
- What is happening within the boundaries of the nation-state;
- The impact of communication technology;
- The shift from “information societies” to “knowledge societies”;
- The existence of dualistic or parallel communication structures (Servaes & Malikhao, 2005, pp. 100-103).

While it is evident that communication for development requires the existence of spaces and resources for everyone to be able to engage in transparent and informed public debate, it also requires political and social structures that prioritise and guarantee access to knowledge, community media and mass media. If the communication processes in society are diluted or non-existent, the capacity for inclusive and equitable sharing of knowledge and experience, and for vital democratic participation in political, economic and cultural decision-making, is diminished with enormous consequences for social change and, by extension, for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It is arguable that the theory and practice of

communication rights and the theory and practice of communication for social change are symbiotic.

Reviewing the Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a set of targets to reduce global poverty and to improve living standards by 2015. They were adopted by 191 UN Member States in 2000 and have become a generally accepted framework and means for developing countries and their development partners to work together in pursuit of a better future for all. If all that sounds too pious, it is salutary to recall the opinion of at least one expert who dissents from the whole process:

A critical examination of the formulation of the goals as well as the definition of the means that would be required to implement them can only lead to the conclusion that the MDGs cannot be taken seriously... Should the exercise not be described as pure hypocrisy, as pulling the wool over the eyes of those who are being forced to accept the dictates of liberalism in the service of the quite particular and exclusive interests of dominant globalized capital?

(Amin, 2006, p. 5)

Nevertheless, the MDGs are being taken seriously, *faute de mieux*, by many governmental and non-governmental agencies. We have to assume, therefore, that considerable public resources will be applied to trying to achieve them and we have to take into account – at least for the purposes of this article – the role that communication rights might play in facilitating their achievement. There are eight goals, whose current progress is indicated in the Millennium Development Goals Report 2007.

1. Poverty and Hunger

Between 1990 and 2015, halve the number of people living on less than \$1 a day. In most developing regions, the average income of those living on less than \$1 a day has increased. The poverty gap ratio, which reflects the depth of poverty as well as its incidence, has decreased in all regions except Western Asia, where the rising poverty

rate has caused the gap to increase, and in the transition countries in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), where there has been a slight deterioration or no change. In contrast, the situation of the poor in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia has improved, mostly due to rapid economic growth. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, the poverty gap ratio remains the highest in the world, indicating that the poor in that region are still the most economically disadvantaged in the world.

Globally, the proportion of children under five who are underweight declined by one fifth over the period 1990-2005. Eastern Asia showed the greatest improvement and is surpassing the MDG target, largely due to nutritional advances in China. Western Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean have also demonstrated significant progress, with underweight prevalence dropping by more than one third. The greatest proportions of children going hungry continue to be found in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Little progress in these regions means that it is unlikely that the global target will be met. If current trends continue, the world will miss the 2015 target by 30 million children, essentially robbing them of their full potential.

2. Education

Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Progress has been made in reducing the number of children out of school, but the number remains high. Based on enrolment data, about 72 million children of primary school age were not in school in 2005; 57% of them were girls. As high as this number seems, surveys show that it underestimates the actual number of children who, though enrolled, are not attending school. Moreover, neither enrolment nor attendance figures reflect children who do not attend school regularly. To make matters worse, official data is not usually available from countries in conflict or post-conflict situations. If data from these countries were reflected in global estimates, the enrolment picture would be worse.

Surveys indicate that attendance by over-age children is very common, especially in some regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, more children of secondary school age are attending primary school than secondary school. Though late enrolment is better than not enrolling at all, it represents a challenge for the education system and

reflects the difficulties families face in sending their children to school. Late enrolment also puts children at a disadvantage by causing potential learning problems and lessening opportunities to advance to a higher level of education. Where the information is available, data show that children who start school at least two years later than the official age are more likely to be from poorer households and have mothers with no formal education.

3. Gender equality

Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015. The MDG Report 2007 fails to address the goal and focuses instead on women's participation in paid, non-agricultural employment (which has continued to increase slowly); women's political participation measured in terms of the number of women in single and lower houses of parliament (up from 13% to 17%); and women law-makers (who, in some countries, are absent altogether). Political leadership is another indicator: as of March 2007, 35 women were presiding officers in parliament, although there is no clear positive trend in the number of women in the highest positions of state or government.

The Report observes that a number of factors are at play in determining women's political representation – including political will, the strength of national women's movements and continued emphasis by the international community on gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the most decisive factor remains gender quota systems. In 2006, countries with quotas nearly doubled the number of women elected, compared to countries without any form of gender quota system. Other countries have supported women's election bids through training and funding.

4. Child Mortality

Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate. Some countries have made good progress and saw a drop of at least 15% in child mortality rates between 1998 and 2004. Survival rates have improved at all ages within the five-year span, but in some countries gains were most pronounced during certain periods – for example, in the vulnerable first month of life. Changes in the levels of child

mortality also show wide differentials according to socio-economic status. In most countries that have made substantial reductions in child mortality in recent years, the largest changes were observed among children living in the richest 40% of households, or in urban areas, or whose mothers have some education. In countries where progress is lagging or where child mortality has increased, AIDS is likely to be a major contributing factor. Malaria, too, continues to kill vast numbers of children. In other countries, war and conflict have been the leading causes of increasing child mortality in the recent past.

5. Maternal Health

Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality rate. A number of middle-income countries have made rapid progress in reducing maternal deaths. Nevertheless, maternal mortality levels remain high across the developing world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. Each year, more than 500,000 women die from treatable or preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth. In sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's risk of dying from such complications over the course of her lifetime is 1 in 16, compared to 1 in 3,800 in the developed world.

Disparities in the support available to women during pregnancy and childbirth are evident both among countries and within them. According to surveys conducted between 1996 and 2005 in 57 developing countries, 81% of urban women deliver with the help of a skilled attendant, versus only 49% of their rural counterparts. Similarly, 84% of women who have completed secondary or higher education are attended by skilled personnel during childbirth, more than twice the rate of mothers with no formal education. In addition, in regions where the adolescent birth rate remains high, a large number of young women, particularly very young women, and their children face increased risk of death and disability.

6. Combat Disease

Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases. HIV prevalence has levelled off in the

developing world, but deaths from AIDS continue to rise in sub-Saharan Africa with HIV (up from 32.9 million in 2001), mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. Globally, 4.3 million people were newly infected with the virus in 2006, with Eastern Asia and the CIS showing the fastest rates of infection. The number of people dying from AIDS has also increased – from 2.2 million in 2001 to 2.9 million in 2006.

Power imbalances between men and women continue to drive the ‘feminization’ of the HIV epidemic, though the dynamics are changing. Increasing numbers of married women are becoming infected, along with girls and young women. In 2006, women comprised 48% of people around the world living with HIV. Youth also places people of both genders at risk. In 2006, 40% of new infections among people aged 15 and older were in the 15 to 24-year age group. The magnitude of the problem is growing: even though 700,000 people received treatment for the first time in 2006; an estimated 4.3 million people were newly infected that year, highlighting the urgent need to intensify prevention efforts. If current trends continue, the number of people with advanced HIV infection in need of therapy will rise faster than treatment services can be scaled up.

Key interventions to control malaria have been expanded in recent years, thanks to increased attention and funding. A number of African countries, for example, have widened coverage of insecticide-treated bed nets, which are among the most effective tools available for preventing the mosquito bites that cause malaria. To meet the MDG target, the most effective treatment for malaria must also be made available to those in need.

7. Environment

Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources; by 2015 halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation; by 2020 to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers. From 1990 to 2005, the world lost 3% of its forests. Deforestation, primarily due to the conversion of forests to agricultural land in developing countries, continues at an alarming rate – about 13 million hectares a year.

The rate of loss has been fastest in some of the world's most biologically diverse regions, including South-Eastern Asia, Oceania, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to the loss of biodiversity, between 18 and 25% of greenhouse gas emissions each year are associated with deforestation, making it a key factor in climate change.

In response to the loss of global biodiversity, the international community has been encouraging protection of the Earth's land and marine environments. The proportion of protected areas globally has steadily increased, and a total of about 20 million square kilometres of land and sea were under protection by 2006. This is an area more than twice the size of China. However, not all protected areas are effectively managed for conservation. Further clouding the picture is the fact that only a fraction of these areas – about 2 million square kilometres – are marine ecosystems, despite their important role in the sustainability of fish stocks and of coastal livelihoods.

As global energy consumption continues to expand – an increase of 20% since 1990 – progress has been made in the development and use of cleaner energy technologies. Energy from renewable resources, such as hydropower and bio-fuels, now accounts for more than 12% of total energy use. The development of more modern renewables, which have no negative impact on people's health or the environment, has increased tenfold over the last several decades. However, these newer technologies, including those that rely on wind, solar, wave and geothermal energy, still account for only 0.5% of total energy consumption.

8. Global Partnership

There are six targets related to special needs: non-discriminatory trading and financial systems, debt reduction, strategies for decent and productive work for youth, access to affordable essential drugs, and making available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications, all aimed at finding a combined global strategy to fight poverty. In general, development aid has fallen, despite renewed commitments by donor countries; donors pledged to double their aid to Africa, but there is little to show so far; preferential market access has stalled for most countries; the debt service burden of developing countries has continued to lighten; in no region

have economies provided full employment for young people; access to information and communication technologies has grown fastest in mobile telephony; Internet use is growing, but remains low throughout the developing world.

How could implementing communication rights help achieve the MDGs?

Grassroots articulation of political, economic, social and cultural problems and challenges together with local mobilization are potential indicators of what has been described as the “much needed legitimization of the global project of communication rights” and “the need to square global advocacy concerns related to communication with community-based concerns” (Thomas, 2005, p. 8). The communication rights movement has failed to convince the public that what are perceived as theoretical or philosophical questions in fact have practical consequences and applications. The communication rights debate has focused on media ownership and control, linguistic rights, support for community media, intellectual property rights, regulation of the cultural industries, media policies, access to technologies, the democratization of knowledge, and media reform. It has not, a few cases excepted, articulated deficits and priorities at the level of the world’s marginalized people, for whom, it could be argued, communication rights are, literally, a matter of life or death.

In 2004 the CRIS Campaign launched its Global Governance and Communication Rights project with research in Brazil, Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines organised around four ‘pillars’ that examined spaces for democratic participation – communicating in the public sphere; communicating knowledge for equity and creativity – enriching the public domain; civil rights in communication; and cultural rights in communication. The first focused on key issues such as freedom and plurality of the press, freedom of information, and the universality of access to the media. The second on the idea of copyright and the public domain. The third on data protection and the right to know. The fourth on indigenous and minority languages and the status and rights they are accorded. While these are vitally important issues, they do not necessarily resonate with landless labourers or refugees or widows and orphans. How, then, can communication rights be grounded in such away that they

can contribute to alleviating poverty, hunger, gender disparity, child and maternal mortality, disease, and environmental degradation?

In a landmark case-study of the right to information movement in India, Pradip Thomas makes a convincing argument that its success was closely related to the fact that it began in the context of a peasant movement responding to struggles at the grassroots level for minimum wages, land, and women's rights, and to make the Public Distribution System accountable. In the face of official denials and unwillingness to cooperate with people's demands, a peasants' movement in Rajasthan organized public hearings to audit local development projects. This led to a demand for copies of all documents related to public works, especially those indicating expenditure and wages. The hearings only reinforced what the public already knew – that there was gross corruption and misappropriation of public funds. In 1997, after many such hearings and protests, the state government of Rajasthan announced the right of all people to demand and receive photocopies of all public works projects undertaken by local development authorities. In turn, this led to a National Campaign for the People's Right to Information and a country-wide Freedom of Information Act (2002) that was amended to become the Right to Information Bill (2004). As the author of the case-study comments:

In the context of real rises in poverty during the last decade, the right to information has become a means of survival for India's poor... All available studies seem to indicate that the right to information movement has played no small role in revitalising participatory democracy in India.

(Thomas, 2007, p. 41)

A further example comes from the 2005 Annual Report of the Independent Media Commission of Sierra Leone, one of the poorest countries of the world and bottom of the United Nations' index of human development indicators. It is a country where any kind of regulatory framework for communication rights has to take second place to the more urgent need to tackle poverty and underdevelopment. The civil war 1991-2002, apart from devastating the country, left 70% of the population illiterate, life expectancy at 38 years, and infant mortality at 17%. At the same time, since the end of the war, the return of many displaced people, including journalists, led to the

emergence of vibrant and diverse media. There are now some 44 newspapers (irregularly published), 33 community radio stations (most supported by international donors), six international radio relay stations and four television stations.

However, media freedom in Sierra Leone has its limits. Media rights monitors have reported that high-level corruption is a taboo topic, with the authorities using libel laws and the courts to target critical journalists. And there are further problems. Low literacy rates, the fact that few media outlets can afford to station reporters outside the capital, a lack of basic resources (uninterrupted electricity and a shortage of reliable printing presses), lack of access to computers, printers, telephones, cameras, etc. undermine the discourse on communication rights. “Without such basic technologies, it is much more difficult for newspaper journalists to cover even basic breaking news stories dealing with political elites, let alone make the effort to broaden access by seeking out the voices of the marginalized and underprivileged” (Wahl-Jorgensen & Cole, 2006, p. 31).

Participatory approaches and local production of content need to be explored in the context of matching issues of “voice” with communication rights and ways of achieving the MDGs. As defined by Jo Tacchi:

“Voice” can be related to active participation in the development project itself, in establishing what should be the focus of development, in the design and implementation of development initiatives, and in the assessment of whether or not positive social change has resulted. This I discuss as “participatory approaches and voices of the poor”. Secondly, “voice” can refer to local content creation, to the expression of a diversity of voices through a range of local media and ICTs. It can be related to the idea of media literacy and digital inclusion and I present this as “local content and creative engagement”.

(Tacchi, 2008, pp. 12-13)

Tacchi describes the project ‘Finding a Voice’ (www.findingavoice.org) that works with a network of 15 local media and ICT initiatives ranging from telecentres to community radio stations in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia to increase local understandings of how ICTs can be both effective in articulating information and

communication concerns and in empowering people to communicate within and beyond marginalized communities. She describes how 12 local researchers are “embedded” in the 15 community initiatives with the express intent of local capacity-building, providing people with the skills to conduct action research and to develop mechanisms and tools for participatory content creation. “The richness that we are starting to see in the data is due to its specificity – it is locally collected and contextualised data. Interesting findings are beginning to emerge that are starting to allow different voices to be heard” (Tacchi, 2008, p. 15) – a key element of communication rights.

Elsewhere, in an article explaining why AIDS is a disease of poor people in poor countries and why communication alone cannot be a panacea for development problems, Bella Mody claims that ‘the cause of AIDS is underdevelopment; the best prevention is development.’ Communication then becomes a dialogue between citizens and governments, and between communities and local decision-makers, in which the media are also complicit:

Media can stimulate dialogue at the grassroots level about what information citizens need, when, and in what form, to educate their governments – this is quintessentially bottom-up communication. Communication media can also share knowledge of opportunities created by the state, to enable their utilization. This would constitute conscionable top-down development communication. But what honest role is there for communicators where there is no development? An advertiser does not start running a media campaign to encourage adoption of a service before it comes to market. When the product is available, the media campaign may become more intensive: repetition may increase. Similarly, one would expect a functioning state to create opportunities for development and then communicate knowledge about them.

(Mody, 2006, p. 32)

Communication Rights Are Human Rights

As a keystone of communication rights, providing access to knowledge is one way of addressing issues related to poverty, health, medicine, education, politics, information technology, and environmental questions and of assessing the achievements and

failures of the MDGs. Policies in these sectors are complex, but recognition and implementation of communication rights are clearly crucial from the perspective of development, although those who advocate communication rights still face an uphill struggle in convincing individuals, the private sector, governmental and non-governmental agencies about their relevance to the development arena. Increasing public awareness and generating wider public debate about communication rights would be important steps towards overcoming inertia and gaining momentum for the MDGs.

But access to knowledge is only one part of the picture. In a recent report, UNDP's Oslo Governance Centre states categorically that linking human rights and MDGs matters, that the human rights framework provides an important tool by helping to ensure that the goals are pursued in an equitable, just and sustainable manner. It also adds an unassailable normative framework that grounds development work within a universal set of values.

(UNDP, 2007, p. 4)

The same can be said of the relationship between human rights and communication rights:

With the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international community recognised the inherent dignity of all members of the human family by providing everyone with equal and inalienable rights. Communication rights are intrinsically bound up with the human condition and are based on a new, more powerful understanding of the implications of human rights and the role of communications. Without communication rights, human beings cannot live in freedom, justice, peace and dignity.

(World Summit on the Information Society, 2003)

Communication rights affirm that people have the right to be consulted and have a say in the decisions that affect them. Effective implementation of the principle of participation is a vital component of creating policies that are legitimate and policies aimed at overcoming social exclusion. The principles of communication rights

determine who is participating (included or excluded) and which “voices” are listened to while decisions are being made.

We have already seen that people have a right to essential information on matters that concern them. The right to information underpins demands for transparent decision-making and public disclosure of information. It is also a vital element of accountability, since governments, public officials, international and national development agencies cannot be held accountable for acts and decisions that remain undisclosed. Individuals and communities need unfettered access to information to empower them to influence decisions that affect them. The right to information implies the right to exchange information and to express opinions in public. Of what use is it otherwise? This includes the right to dissent, since people who cannot voice alternative points of view because they are prevented from speaking or deprived of the tools to form and disseminate opinions are effectively disempowered.

Such claims are similar to the strategic demands that emerged from the World Congress on Communication for Development, Rome (25-27 October 2006). Calling for development organizations to place a much higher priority on the essential elements in communication development processes, participants noted that achieving progress towards the MDGs “requires addressing some very sensitive and difficult challenges: respect for cultural diversity, self-determination of people, economic pressures, environment, gender relations, and political dynamics among others” (Rome Consensus, 2006). Its strategic demands stressed:

- The right and possibility for people to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.
- Creating opportunities for the sharing of knowledge and skills.
- Ensuring that people have access to communication tools so that they can communicate within their communities and with people making decisions that affect them.
- The process of dialogue, debate and engagement that builds public policies that are relevant, helpful and which have committed constituencies willing to implement them.

- Recognising and harnessing the communication trends that are taking place at local, national and international levels for improved development action.
- Adopting an approach that is contextualised within cultures.
- Related to all of the above a priority to ensure that the people most affected by the development issues in their communities and countries have their say, voice their perspectives, and contribute and act on their ideas for improving their situation.

The trajectory of the communication rights movement has emphasised over and over again that open and participatory information and communication processes underlie any and all successful efforts to change societies, their attitudes and behaviour. Such processes lead to better, more transparent and accountable governance, the creation of a vibrant and dynamic civil society, and to rapid and more equitable economic growth. Effective communication only takes place in a process that engages people and enters into dialogue with them. Governmental and non-governmental organizations and all concerned with social development and justice need to recognise and strengthen the central role in development played by information, knowledge, and communication – especially the importance of strengthening the capacities of poor and marginalised people to participate directly in political and development processes. Yet, as a Panos report recently pointed out:

What has been missing is a wide-ranging, holistic approach to the information and communication challenges in their entirety and – even more importantly – the sustained political will to address them. It is precisely because politicians and power-holders recognise the importance of information, communication and the media that they fear the consequences of increasing access and availability.

(Panos, 2007, pp. 25-26)

In preparation for the UN Millennium+5 Summit (September 2005), which reviewed the implementation of the Millennium Declaration, representatives of many NGOs in the Global South offered a detailed commentary of the MDGs calling on leaders of the international community to take bold and decisive action “to address the crucial challenges of our times and put in place the ambitious strategy that is needed to secure the future of the world for generations to come” (<http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informesTematicos/88.html>). This civil society

Benchmark identified a number of deficits in the Millennium Declaration in the light of global events since its adoption in 2000 and in relation to global security, challenges to the authority of the UN, and environmental degradation.

In particular, the Benchmark urged world leaders to commit to reducing the inequality and social injustice that are major sources of national and international instability and conflict; to promoting development strategies based on sustainable local livelihoods, food sovereignty, environment regeneration, and people's real needs; to recognizing the centrality of gender equality and of fully and effectively implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (2005); to taking urgent action in the face of climate change; to stopping militarization and the proliferation of weapons; to adopting measures to generate international development financing, increase aid, and once and for all remove unsustainable levels of debt; to establishing equitable systems of taxation in each and every country; to ensuring that the global trade system is fair and just; to extending the critical fight against the pandemics devastating countless communities and ensuring adequate priority is given to them; to promoting corporate accountability; to radically reforming the multilateral system of governance and strengthen and democratizing the UN; and to engaging with civil society in all processes of decision-making nationally, regionally and internationally.

Conspicuous by its absence from the Civil Society Benchmark was any mention of the role of social communications or communication rights in tackling these issues. The 2005 World Summit Outcome (the Resolution subsequently adopted by the UN General Assembly) took account of many of the deficits identified in the Benchmark. Yet it avoided affirming the absolute relevance of communication except under 'Science and technology for development', where it commits the United Nations to:

Building a people-centred and inclusive information society so as to enhance digital opportunities for all people in order to help bridge the digital divide, putting the potential of information and communication technologies at the service of development and addressing new challenges of the information society by implementing the outcomes of the Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society and ensuring the success of the second phase of the Summit, to be held in Tunis in November 2005.

(World Summit Outcome, 2005, paragraph 60g)

Many will find this a weak and inadequate summation of what is actually needed. Its emphasis on the contested notion of the “information society” and its reliance on the panacea of “information and communication technologies” fall far short of the expectations of civil society expressed at both WSIS Geneva and Tunis as well as of the communication rights movement as a whole. For these reasons, it is not inappropriate, and especially so in the face of the arguments presented above, to propose a new benchmark for whatever Millennium+10 Summit may be envisaged for the future. Its text might read:

That governments, the public sector, global corporations, non-governmental organizations, civil society entities and all those concerned with social justice and inclusion recognize and strengthen communication rights as essential to building people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented societies, to countering the discrimination, exclusion and isolation of different marginalised and vulnerable groups and communities, and to affirming the inherent dignity, equality, and inalienable rights of all people as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

In practical terms, and in direct relation to the MDGs, recognizing, implementing, and building on communication rights will create ‘enabling environments’ in which structural, political, economic, and cultural obstacles to improving the lives of people in different communities can be identified, analysed, and action taken to subvert them. These obstacles will vary in their particularities and specificities (global, regional, national, and local). And the enabling environments depend upon access to information and communication and unobstructed maintenance of spaces for communal and public debate that are directly related to ways of tackling the problems and challenges of poverty and hunger, education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, combating disease, environment, and global partnerships. The aim is to require and ensure participation by every segment and sector of society so that people can act collectively, effectively, and justly. Enabling environments help people to know what to do, how to do it, and they provide them with the resources to act. As one leading commentator has consistently pointed out:

Society and its institutions must enable the active participation of all in the economic, political and cultural life of the community. This is not a high-minded expression of benevolence, but a demand of justice. Such participation in the field of communication is, of course, more than “consumer choice” or passive access to the mass media, or even the interactive chats between buddies on the Internet. The participation meant here is public dialogue about the public good. Its aim is to contribute to the debate about society, its values and priorities, and, above all, our common future. It’s a dynamic and ongoing process, aimed at change and transformation.

(Traber, 1999, p. 8)

Only in this way might there be any reasonable hope of getting closer to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

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