

Sustainable Development and Strategic Communication

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Abstract: Since later part of the twentieth century, considerable attention and research have been focused on the field of sustainable development and strategic Communication which evolved gradually from development communication, to environmental communication to communication for sustainable development (SD). The day by day increasing population and fast depleting basic requirements for the existence of all the species drew attention of researchers. Generally, the work in this direction is done by top global organizations but clarity of concept and awareness among main stakeholders is still missing. Sustainable development is a communications challenge in itself because it is difficult to promote, persuade and convince for action and practice in day to day life. Hence, sustainable development integrated with strategic communication has become the need of the hour. The article, therefore, with its focus on strategic communication integrated with 'sustainable development' with its social, economic and ecological dimension, aims at presenting in brief and simple manner the gist of existing research, dedicated reports and work on sustainability communication for audience who have no time for, and interest in reading big reports or thick books. It tries to explain the concept and explore the role strategic communication can play for a sustainable transition. Multifarious activities in the process of sustainable development from policy making to implementation depend on effective and strategic communication itself. Surprisingly, despite its acknowledged impact, communication is rarely integrated in development programmes as a strategic tool. The literature review based analysis finds that strategic communication can play a crucial role at all stages and has enough potential to meet various challenges associated with the implementation of sustainable development programmes and thus recommends overall synchronization between Sustainable development and communication strategies.

Keywords: Sustainable, Strategy, Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Since later part of the twentieth century, considerable attention and research have been focused on the field of strategic Communication which evolved gradually from development communication, to environmental communication to communication for sustainable development (SD). As the population is increasing day by day and basic requirements for the existence of all the species are decreasing and depleting fast, and "humanity overall requires 50 percent more resources than the nature can produce"[1]; sustainable development integrated with strategic communication has become the need of the hour. Development includes various activities from policy making to action and brings several changes in its wake. Sustainable development is a communications challenge in itself because it is difficult to 'sell' [2]. All these require strategic communication.

Aim

Today, development communication and environmental communication in general have become

established fields in themselves but communication for sustainable development in specific still needs more work to be done. Generally, the work in this direction is done by top global organizations like GTZ Rioplus, German development cooperation agencies, and IUCN-CEC, World Bank, FAO etc. and global level conferences like World Congress on Communication for Sustainable Development(WCCD), 2006, are organized by certain international groups or organizations but even twenty years after Rio, clarity of concept, awareness among main stakeholders: those who have to implement and those who have to practice it in their day to day affairs, is still missing. Besides, S.D. is still considered a communication problem and the gap between 'Said' and 'Done' highlighted by Rioplus as follows, also needs to be bridged

'Said – Done!

Said is not yet heard

Heard is not yet understood

Understood is not yet approved

And approved is not yet done.'[3]

One example of these Communication problems between ‘Said’ and ‘Done’ is - The people who talk about environment keep separate car for each individual in the house.

Thus, the article aims at putting the concept, researched by researchers and highlighted by top level scholars and organizations, in a brief, concise and clear manner for target audience who have no time for, and interest in reading big reports or thick books. The article also highlights the significance of strategic communication for the success of sustainable development programmers. Without this, the SD concept will not succeed because multifarious activities in the process - whether it is policy making or implementation; depend on effective and strategic communication itself. Surprisingly, despite its acknowledged impact, communication is rarely integrated in development programmers as a strategic tool.

The article, therefore, with its focus on strategic communication integrated with ‘sustainable development’ with its social, economic and ecological dimension, aims at presenting in brief and simple manner the gist of existing research, dedicated reports and work on sustainability communication and tries to explore the role strategic communication can play for a sustainable transition.

The prerequisite for a social welfare scheme like SD is participation of all stakeholders at every step: planning – execution – evaluation, which requires strong communication strategy as it is a difficult task to make people change their environment related practices unless they realize its value and become a part of the whole process from planning to action for change. Consequently, OECD and UNDP regard communication and awareness rising as one of nine core mechanisms to support strategy [4].

Issues under Consideration

The article considers why strategic communication for SD is required? It considers numerous aspects of communication strategy: Situation analysis and problem identification, Communication objectives, Audience identification, Communication flow: Downward, upward, horizontal, feedback, you attitude, listening, delivering benefits that people want vs. Just information dissemination, solving barriers vs. educating people, and over all synchronization of sustainable development and strategic communication.

Sustainable Development

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need.” (World Commission Report). Thus Sustainable development (SD) refers to economic growth without

depletion of natural resources. SD concerns not only ecological but also social and economic aspects [5]

Activities within the Periphery of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development (SD) implies preserving overall balance and fulfillment of several conditions. The important ones are:

- Fulfillment of fundamental requirements of present and future generations like water, health, education, employment.
- Improvement in living standard and fight against starvation and undernourishment.
- Innovation and Promotion of renewable energy like wind and solar energy.
- Prevention of depleting natural assets for present and future generations by - restoration, development, and protection of habitats that are vital for species; conservation of every day decreasing quality of the environment; and reduction of waste production.

In brief, it comprises ‘the cogent management of various resources: human, natural, and economic that are inevitable requirement of human existence in the long run’ [6].

Evolution of the Concept

Let us first brief the historical evolution of the concept of SD. The concept of Sustainable development came into existence mainly to solve “various problems raised by demographic growth, the planet’s limited capacity, and social inequality” [7].

The resources required for human survival on the earth are limited and cannot foster the needs of rapidly increasing population. Moreover, the available resources are either depleting fast or their quality is deteriorating day by day, due to human activities. For example, Industrial Growth, Greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and their visible affects like accelerating global warming, disturbed climate, changing natural cycles, and diminishing biodiversity. All these are ultimately threatening the future of all the species that exist on the earth. ‘In order to be sustainable, therefore, development must be harmonious’.

‘Faced with the over-exploitation of natural resources that accompanied economic and demographic growth, the Club of Rome, created in 1968, and advocated zero growth. In 1971, this private international association sounded an urgent alarm and drew the attention of the people from all over the world by publishing ‘The Limits to Growth’. The organization presented the grave fact that current economic development is incompatible with the long-term protection of the planet’ [8]

The concept was initially known as ‘eco development’. In 1972, the United Nations Conference

on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm. The term sustainable development was coined in this conference. After initial 'conflict between the ecology and the economy' 'the integration of social equity and ecological caution were incorporated into the economic development models. This resulted in the creation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)' (ibid). The document published by International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) about world conservation strategy, in 1980, 'is one of the original sources of the expression 'sustainable development.' The term 'sustainable development' became popular with Harlem Brundtland report 'Our common future', published in 1987.

The aim of SD is to find a feasible, rational, consistent and long-lasting balance between various development activities by human beings i.e. economic and social development; and environmental protection and maintenance. It is the responsibility of all – government, society, organizations, companies, and individuals to take care of all these three areas.

For this well planned and viable strategy is required. It can never be a stand-alone project rather coordination of various complementing projects and processes together can formulate strong and successful sustainable strategy.

SD STRATEGIES

Being strategic implies 'long-term vision with clear and fixed priorities, effective coordination and collaboration, objective achievement oriented approaches and systematic management of all initiatives- finance and human capital. Sustainable development strategy includes numerous components. The important components are:

Good governance

Which consists of decision making and policy framing.

Implementation

It involves numerous steps

- Consensus of all stakeholders ,citizens, and concerned organizations
- Awareness Programmed: Through education, training, media ,interpersonal communication and involvement
- A Mechanism: For information dissemination, persuasion, coordination, collaboration, action, supervision, accountability, feedback and final reporting. Pilot activities to generate learning and ownership
- Decentralization of authority with proper reporting system
- Survey to identify life style, attitudes and requirements of stakeholders to plan strategy accordingly.

- Forum for negotiation and conflict resolution
- Legislative support
- Developing the sense of ownership
- Proper downwards supervision and active upwards involvement
- Change management
- Rules, regulations and standards to be followed

Besides, 'Segmentation and Analysis of target audience with reference to their choice of information sources, their preferred information consumption style, time and pattern, is imperative to make the programme a success'.

Role of Communication

Communication is the principle vehicle for this. "This is why OECD and UNDP regard communication and awareness raising as one of nine core mechanisms to support strategy processes for sustainable development. Related core mechanisms that cannot be but analytically separated from communication are participation, negotiation and conflict management." [9]. SD as a term is difficult to communicate, as it remains abstract in comparison to concrete environmental goals. 'Communication has to make people understand SD. If not, people may change their attitudes but they will not take action. Journalists and public relations experts such as the WWF-UK campaigns director have labeled the term SD a communication problem in itself' [10]. Thus first the attention is drawn towards developing communication strategy.

Evolution of Sustainable Communication

Development communication (Dev Com)

The concept of Dev Com as a specific strategic tool emerged in the early 1960s and initially the term was used for development and welfare activities related to agriculture, health, 'nation building', rural development, as well as family planning. It is the focused, planned and well-structured use of communication to support effective policymaking, public participation and project implementation geared towards social, economic, political and ecological development. It is a two-way inters action process between the implementers and the stakeholders to understand key factors and their interdependencies to manage development projects in a competent way. Dev Com aims not so much at information dissemination as at a shared vision of a sustainable future and at capacity building in social groups to solve or prevent rising problems[11]. "Development communication is not merely a matter of transmitting information about how things can be done better by using available resources and facilities -- it also involves generation of psychic mobility or

empathy, raising of aspirations and willingness to work hard to meet those aspirations” [12].

Generally, communication is perceived in generic terms but there is a need to regard it specific to a particular issue. Hence, here, we narrow down from Dev Com to Environmental communication (Env Com). Since the middle of the nineteenth century, development communication has drawn the active attention of the researchers and miscellaneous theories, concepts and strategies emerged in the field of development communication [13]. Environmental communication (Env Com) picked up the thread and carried it forward since the mid-1990s.

Environmental communication

After Rio Conference in 1990s the term Env Com, became popular. It was realized by policy makers that It is a “must have” management tool required for policy framing, its implementation and project management and that “It is the missing link between ‘said’ and ‘done’, between policy on paper and its implementation process” [14].

Communication for Sustainable Development

After the Rio Conference in 1992, attention was drawn towards working on communication issues in relation with sustainable development.

Why Communication is required?
Communication is required at every step from Policy to awakening awareness to Action.

Awareness, Participation, mobilization, Implementation

Any new initiative first requires awareness programme. The sustainable development agenda needs to be communicated to people at all levels as this is a program “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” It can be a reality through stakeholder participation only and to make people participate, they must be aware of the concept and how it is going to benefit them as well as the posterity in the long run. “Without information, there is no participation [15]. Hence, information dissemination, followed by interpersonal communication for clarification of queries is essential. These can help people think in the changed direction. The task, however, does not end with the dissemination of information through various channels rather it goes beyond to mobilize and facilitate action that, ultimately, would lead to changes. No change can take place without active and positive involvement of stakeholders. The process from awareness to adoption and action involves active support and involvement of all stakeholders. Along with knowledge and positive attitudes what matters is change in the real practice of the people

The prerequisite for a social welfare scheme like SD is participation. Participation by stakeholders is

the backbone of success in multifarious ways: It strengthens the program, adds credibility to it and also helps them improve their own skill which will ultimately lead to the success of the programme. Participation is obligatory at every step: planning – execution – evaluation. This flow can run smoothly with the tool of strong strategic communication as it is a difficult task to make people change their sustainable development related practices unless they realize its value and become a part of the whole process from planning to action for change.

Public participation

Takes much longer and depends on incentives, formal and informal education and training, and results in practice change. Communication is the missing link between the subject matter of SD issues and the related sociopolitical processes of policy making and public participation. This requirement is voiced by many environmentalists as well who seek social sustainability in conservation and regard public participation therein a pre-requisite for sustainable development [16].

The implementation process needs behavior change not only of those who have to practice it in their day to life but of those as well who influence their decisions and behaviours. The strategy requires that for the smooth flow of this task, “Effective communication programs need to target “influencers” – whether they are health providers, village elders, or members of a person’s family” [17].

Motivating and mobilizing people are nuts and bolts for successful participation of all the concerned. Mobilizing various stakeholders from different sectors- governments, organizations, experts and people, is a herculean task. If the communication fails to inspire and mobilize the stakeholders to become a willing strong link of the chain, it is simply one way dissemination of information leading to fiasco.

Communication Strategy

The sustainable development initiative cannot survive in isolation. This needs to be backed by an all-inclusive communication strategy. Hence, proper focus on comprehensive Strategic Communication is inevitable. The article considers following aspects as part of communication strategy:

Communication objectives

Audience identification for communication
Communication flow: Downward, upward, horizontal, feed back
Feedback
You attitude
Listening
Message design

Communication objectives The communication objective with reference to sustainable development are :

- To create awareness by information dissemination and thereby increase knowledge.
- Influence thinking, attitudes and existing practices of all concerned.
- Make the audience participate.
- Focus on desired results.
- Take inputs through feedback

Audience Identification

To use the full potential of strategic Sustainable communication , the identification and careful analysis of all stakeholders and target groups, for whom message is devised and from whom change is expected , is crucial part of the strategy. “While mass media play a major role in the awareness and interest phase, interpersonal communication with neighbors and friends takes over when it comes to evaluation, trial and adoption or rejection” [18]. “The process is consumer-driven, not expert-driven” [19].

Implementation mechanisms - Communication Flow

Smooth and effective flow of Communication is the rudimentary foundation of successful implementation process. Downward communication for those who have to implement the schemes; upward communication to discuss issues and problems or to give experience based suggestions; Horizontal communication for lots of Coordination involved – all these need proper attention and strategic approach. Effective and efficient Downward, Upward and horizontal Communication help smooth and efficient flow of work. ‘Both – bottom up to inform central decision-makers and top-down to inform community groups in different places’ [20].

Vertical Communication

Researchers and practitioners observed and suggested that “ Many failed top-down planning decisions testify to the need for a judicious balance of both top-down and bottom-up approaches”[21] . Generally, the decisions are taken and policies are framed inside the board rooms at top management levels by ministers, bureaucrats or specially constituted commissions etc. but implementation process involves diverse other stakeholders at different levels. Right information to right people at the right time is crucial for the success of any scheme or project. In the series of communication flow, first comes the “process of downward flow of communication to those who actually have to work on this, carry it forward and make it a success. The clear and timely downward diffusion of all the pertinent information is the so far ignored basic requirement for the successful implementation and monitoring of the programmer [22].”

Horizontal

The shift from proposal to action **involves various activities and coordination i.e.** generating funds, meetings, discussions, delegation of duties and team work where the significance of horizontal flow of smooth, clear unambiguous and effective communication cannot be ignored. The well-coordinated governance among economic, social and environmental concerns is the vital requirement of the implementation process [23].

Feedback

Communication by definition incorporates feedback. Information does not. Communication is the transmission belt between information dissemination and action planning. Thus, strategic communication is more than disseminating of information. It ensures a two-way flow of communication, and helps building consensus and partnerships regarding the development agenda.” Input from targeted audience, is an elementary requisite to frame activities and content of SD drive. Communicating sustainable development is a difficult job because of its abstract nature. Comprehension Gap between what the programme and policy say and what is understood by target audience generally remains very large. To avoid this barrier a two way communication is essential. “Conflicts of interest were fought by ‘stakeholders’, not negotiated by ‘shareholders’, leading to one-way information dissemination disregarding understanding, instead of relying on two-way communication towards ‘shared meaning’ and ‘win-win’ situations [24].” Thus, communication with its essential ingredient feedback is the much required bridge between information dissemination and action. The implementation process which involves several activities like coordination, cooperation and collaboration, is compromised without two way communication. Through feedback one can find the weak links of the shackle of programmer. ‘Selectively monitor crucial program elements by means of simple and manageable indicators for the behavior one wishes to change [25].’ Feedback makes it possible to improve and refine programs [26].

You Attitude

The communication needs to be done in terms of you attitude. Before formulating strategy, proper information about and problems and requirements of stakeholders must be collected and analyzed. Instead of imposing the programme it should be communicated in terms of how it can benefit them in the short as well as long term as “Sustainable development means absolutely nothing to most people and never will. But – people do relate to SD, once the term is translated to ,my life‘, ,my work‘, ,my investments‘, ,my health‘or ,my future [27].”

SD communication strategy, therefore, should not ignore the following process

- Instead of imposing the SD agenda communicate the aspects that make sense to people in their context.
- Instead of telling and advising what to do, ask what contribution they can make.
- Instead of using SD nomenclature prefers simple language.
- Along with training of the technicalities of the subject, weightage should also be given to training about audience understanding.

This brings us to the fact that communicating is not only about speaking but also about listening.

Listen to people

No initiative, project, scheme, or implementation process can be accomplished by imposition. It requires listening with understanding as its key component. Message designing is based on audience's needs and interests which can be segmented only after proper Listening. Listen what are stakeholders' concerns? Whether they are convinced about SD'S benefits? How would they like it to be implemented? Based on the information gathered, deliver benefits people want, not just information. Solving barriers the people face and not just educating them is required. "For Civil society mobilization - - - initiatives should focus more on how to listen than on how to talk [28]. Communication is about bridging understanding towards shared meaning [29].

Message Design

The content is the soul of communication and needs to be designed carefully. In the present day digital world, the old day's problem of non-availability of information has been replaced by the problem of information overload. People are rushing out of time. Hence message needs to be so strategically designed that it does not escape the attention of the target addressees. Various models have been suggested by researchers for how to design the content. The important ones are:

'KISS AIDA' model

KISS

K- Keep, I-It, S-Short, S-Simple

AIDA

- Draw **A**ttention, arouse **I**nterest, instigate **D**esire and finally lead to **A**ction.
- The models, though, initially used in social marketing, apply to all the communication related areas.
- Besides, not only the information that we want to convey but also the information that the audience want should be made accessible to them. All the information should be transparent and relevant and should be conveyed timely.

Communication Channels

Strategic communication through mass media

The programmer and its benefits to audience should be broadcast on radio, telecast on TV or sent through WhatsApp etc. to strengthen implementation process. Media selection for communications should be based on the information-seeking lifestyle of the stakeholders- their favorite sources of information, the particular time they devote to it (afternoon or evening or late night etc), their communication networks and the like.

Interpersonal Communication

Although. Today, mass media is a very strong source of creating awareness, the role of interpersonal communication with people of the community, neighbors, colleagues and friends takes the upper hand in matters of evaluation, adoption or rejection [30].

Communication is indispensable in conflict management

During implementation process often the interests of different stakeholders may clash invariably leading to conflicts between them. In this situation, resorting to judicial system always cannot be an opposite mechanism to solve genuine yet opposite interests though, no doubt, this may be the last step in certain cases. In modern times, generally, the conflicts are managed through negotiation or mediation which instead of imposing solution may help facilitate conciliation between the concerned parties. Negotiation and mediation, generally, proffer ways to "build consensus and convergence in situations of open conflict. This demand for active and strategic communication during interaction.

CONCLUSION

Strategic communication plays a crucial role at all stages and can efficiently expedite the whole implementation process of sustainable development from conception to action to success. It can help in making fast and effective decisions, Persuading stakeholders to adopt new policies, facilitating coordination among various concerned groups and motivating people. It can create awareness, convince stakeholders to improve their behavior and adopt desired changes and thereby can fetch their support for sustainable development programmer. Strategic communication interventions are multi-faceted, systematically planned and carefully designed communication processes. Problem identifies cation, agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, management and control etc. cannot do without properly defined communication support. Hence, Strat Com is the lifeblood of enlightened decision-making and effective action towards environmental sustainability: Thus, strategic communication has enough potential to meet various

challenges associated with the implementation of sustainable development programmes. Strategic communication, however, is not a magic wand but rather a powerful tool that helps complete set of strategies. Thus, the synchronization between Sustainable development and communication strategies can make things happen.

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