

Community-Based Communication: A New Approach to Development Communication

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Introduction

This paper makes a simple assertion – rural villages that have developed relatively complex communication systems have extensive local knowledge and practice systems. Although such assertion seems like common sense, it counters the dominant mind set of development communication practice. For the past several decades, practitioners have focused on introducing modern but alien communication channels (whether media, participatory or information and communication technologies) to rural communities. And understandably, this is due to the unwaveringly belief in the transmission view of communication – sender, message, channel, receiver and effect.

From the 1960s to the late 1970s, development experts have directed efforts towards identifying the psychological and social factors, which account for the marginalized groups' resistance to change and formulating strategies to break through the barriers. Modern technologies have been perceived as superior over traditional agricultural practices. The target groups just need to adopt the new technology. Communication, considered as the key to adoption, should be planned, developed, organized and implemented with outside help and in which the beneficiaries are merely passive receivers. Communication specialists relied on top-to-bottom linear communication models and media-based strategies to persuade target groups to obtain new knowledge and adopt new practices. Development Communication Specialist Felix Librero (1987) articulated: "The strategy is based on the design of communication activities around a preferred medium as a pivotal point." Such approach was based on the works of early communication scholars Schramm, Lerner and Rogers. Basically, they propagated a persuasive, sender-oriented communication model.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, the failure of rural development strategies to achieve their objectives was traced to the lack of participation of the intended development beneficiaries. Development communication practitioners began to shift their focus to a decentralized and participatory communication strategy. According to Librero, "the central principle in this strategy is community cooperation and personal growth. Essential here is the ability of one to 'participate as an equal in a shared process.' Participatory strategy aims to foster greater participation and working together." In spite of these commendable efforts, development

communication practitioners continued to experience difficulties in achieving objectives. Serra (1989) tried to explain the lack of support from local residents for participatory communication projects. First, she stated that it was hard to sell the idea since communication sounded abstract to the grassroots. Second, communication knowledge and skills were a monopoly of the local elite. Third, there was lack of know-how on sound planning and management. As a result, development agencies end up operating the community medium or implementing the communication project. Alcala (1990) added that practitioners had a hard time adjusting to their role as mere facilitators (not managers) of community media. “Although responsible for the success of a project, practitioners lose a power position in the participatory approach. Also, being a facilitator requires definite skills and personal characteristics.” Steeves (1993), for his part, commented that “theories of participation and interactivity advanced thus far have been overly simplistic. One major inadequacy is the assumption that participants are equal, an assumption that ignores huge power differentials in Third World communication situations.”

In the late 1980s, development communication practitioners started looking into the promise of new communication technologies in bringing about rural development. They viewed these new technologies as agents of change – enabling the speedy delivery of health, educational and agricultural information. Given its interactive nature, they believed that these new technologies allow marginalized sectors of society to solve development-oriented problems without ending up as passive receivers of communication messages. The marginalized sectors may even use these technologies to transmit information and knowledge to a wide range of audiences, thus realizing a bottom-up communication flow. With these in mind, governments, donors and development agencies invested heavily on the technology – wanting to realize the benefits that internet access promised in their fight against poverty. To quote the World Bank (1998): “This new technology greatly facilitates the acquisition and absorption of knowledge, offering developing countries unprecedented opportunities to enhance educational systems, improve policy formation and execution, and widen the range of opportunities for business and the poor.”

Librero (1991) cited that “defined information technology as “the acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of vocal, pictorial, textual and numerical information by a microelectronic-based combination of computing and telecommunications.” The promise of new communication technologies in addressing development problems, however, may most probably remain a promise for a long period of time. As Panos (1998) stated: “New communications technologies are revolutionising access to information – but the revolution is likely to reach everyone but the poor.” Heeks (1999) contended: “The poor simply do not have these resources. In a world where 80 percent of the world’s population has no access to reliable telecommunications, and one third has no access to electricity, it is hardly surprising that the internet reaches few poor people. Likewise, more than half of low-income countries’ population is illiterate, with a far greater proportion unable to read English, the language that dominates digitised information.” The poor will be unlikely to control or use the technology hands-on in any significant number for the foreseeable future.

One main flaw in all these communication approaches – media, participatory and information technology – is its definition of communication as the mere transmission of messages from a source to a receiver using various channels. In contrast, this paper argues for the utilization of both transmission and meaning negotiation viewpoints of communication. In the latter viewpoint, communication is seen as the process of negotiation and exchange of meaning, wherein information, people and perspectives interact so as to produce socially shared meanings, definitions or understandings. In this perspective, development communication practitioners may venture more into the management and construction of local knowledge and practices instead of focusing solely on information dissemination. They may rethink approaches that target beneficiaries as individuals and instead, view them in the context of their communities. Furthermore, they may find it wise to study the beneficiaries' perspective vis-à-vis management of local communication resources, not simply introducing modern channels. It is of paramount importance to develop community-based communication to ensure awareness, definition, incorporation and institutionalization of innovation and new technologies into the local knowledge and practice system.

To explore the plausibility of this paper's assertion, an ethnographic study of a farming village in Thailand's second top rice producing province was conducted. The study seeks to understand how rice farmers in a community in Chainat province utilize communication to improve their knowledge and practices vis-à-vis rice crop production. It should be noted that Thailand has consistently been the world's top rice exporter for the past several decades given its comparative production advantage and declining domestic per capita consumption. Rice likewise remains as the country's principal crop, accounting for 29 percent of total crop value added and one-half of total cultivated land. Studying and observing one of its top rice producing villages may provide insights on how technologies are assessed or given meaning, how knowledge and practices in rice farming are constructed and what the role of communication is in facilitating these processes. Needless to say, since the study looks at a farming village which has an extensive local knowledge and practice system in rice production, it is expected that the same village has a relatively developed community-based communication system.

The study is concerned with how a small homogenous community in the Chainat province in Thailand utilizes communication to improve rice crop production. It asks: What roles do communication play in the formation of collective definitions (perspectives) and the construction of local knowledge and practices in rice farming? The objectives of the study were as follows:

- To investigate how a rice farming village in the Chainat province organizes, shares, moves and gains information on rice farming;
- To determine how the rice farming village makes use of these information to form collective definitions (or perspectives) on rice farming; and

- To describe the village's knowledge and practices on rice farming in the light of these collective definitions (or perspectives).

The study uses a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive design. It utilizes both primary and secondary data and a case (ethnographic) study approach. Research method and techniques consists of the following: 1) review of materials conducted by researchers and academicians regarding rice farming villages in Thailand; 2) review of materials regarding the profile of the research site; 3) interview with nine leaders in the community regarding rice farming knowledge and practices in the community; 4) interview with 20 farmers in the community regarding collective definitions and rice farming knowledge and practices; 5) interview with key persons (a total of nine) concerned with agricultural extension and research in the research site; and 6) observation of meetings and other rice farming activities in the village which are related to the study.

The research results were divided into four sections: site and respondent profile, communicating rice farming, collectively defining rice farming, and rice farming knowledge and practices.

Site and Respondent Profile

The study was conducted in Baan Sap Som Boon (new name) or Baan Nongsai (old name), Nonglue Subdistrict, Muang District, Chainat Province. Chainat province is one of the 26 provinces comprising Thailand's central region. The Chao Phraya River runs through the province. In the past, Chainat was an important province used several times as a base to confront the Burmese army. The Burmese were defeated every time, thus the name 'Chainat' which means a 'place of victory.' Chainat occupies an area of 2,469 square kilometers and is administratively divided into six districts: Amphoe Muang Chainat, Amphoe Hankha, Amphoe Manorom, Amphoe Sankhaburi, Amphoe Sapphaya, Amphoe Wat Sing, and two minor districts: King Amphoe Nong Mamong and King Amphoe Noen Kham.

Based on the Agricultural Statistics of Thailand Crop Year 2002/03, Chainat is the second top rice-producing province with 552,118 tons for major season and 470,407 tons for second season. In terms of yield, Chainat has 611 kilograms per rai or 97.76 per hectare (major season) and 760 kilograms per rai or 121.6 per hectare (second season). Chainat depends heavily on the cereal. Around 77.2 percent of landholdings in the province are devoted to rice paddies. Chainat likewise has a bigger average farm size (30.67 rai or 4.9 hectares) as compared to other central region provinces.

Baan Sap Som Boon (Village or Moo 13 of Nonglue Subdistrict) is located around 20 kilometers west of the town center of the Muang District. The village has a total area of 1,960 rai, of which 81.6 percent is devoted to agricultural uses. Of the 1,600 rai allotted for agricultural purposes, 94 percent is planted to rice and 6 percent to fruit trees. The village has a surface water area of 100 rai. The subdistrict of Nonglue is composed of 15 villages and Baan Sap Som Boon is one of the newest – having been formalized only more than two years ago. Before, it was part of Baan Nongkea (Village or Moo 8 of the subdistrict). Although identified as Baan Sap Som Boon by government, villagers call their community by its original name, Nongsai. Baan Sap Som Boon or Baan Nongsai has a total population of 125 households or 541 people – 250 (46.2 percent) males and 291 (53.7 percent) females. It has an average family size of 4.23.

The study has 20 farmer respondents from Baan Sap Som Boon – 16 males and 4 females. Their ages range from 33 to 70 years old with a mean age of 52. All respondents are Buddhists and are married with zero to four children. More than half of them, however, have two children. As to educational attainment, 15 respondents have reached level 4 while four have reached level 6. Only one respondent finished level 9. Most respondents have stayed in the village for more than two decades. Eight respondents were born and have stayed in the village for their entire life. Almost all respondents believe that life is more satisfying in the village. They describe their village to be rich in water and their fields convenient to farm since these are near their houses. Some respondents perceive the soil in the village to be richer in nutrients as compared to other villages. They would leave their village only if they lose their land or if a natural catastrophe occurs.

The size of the land farmer respondents till ranges from 7 to 83 rai. More than half of them plant only rice in the fields while the rest also plant some fruit trees such as mango, longan, jackfruit, plum, coconut, banana and pomelo. A few respondents have corn as a second crop. Of the 20 respondents, 12 plant rice three times a year, four plant five times in two years and four plant twice a year. Three-fourths use only chemical agents, four mix chemicals with organic agents and one utilizes only organic compounds. With regards to water sources, eleven farmers have access to both ground water (well) and the irrigation canal, six have only ground water (well), two have only the irrigation canal and one has access to ground water (well), irrigation canal and the river. Twelve farmer respondents utilize both the irrigation canal and ground water (well) since the former can water only a portion of their fields – from 10 to 80 percent. Nine respondents own the land they till, eight both own a portion and rent a portion of the land they till and three wholly rent the land they till. Two land owners have mortgaged their property to the bank.

All farmer respondents no longer use a water buffalo. Instead, they own one to three tractors with brand names Kubota, Mitsubishi and Yanmar and with horsepower ranging from 8 to 21.

All respondents have an irrigation/water pump with brands Honda, Kubota and Mitsubishi. They likewise own small tools such as hoes, spades, scythes, back sprayers (for insect pests), grass cutters, long knives, crowbars, shovels and others. Six farmer respondents raise livestock – ducks, fish, chickens and pigs. Six respondents have off-farm income generating activities. These include making joss sticks, money lending, selling farm inputs and construction. Four respondents hire themselves out as farm laborers during harvests and for spraying insecticides. The rest earn money wholly from farm activities – rice, fruits, corn, fish and livestock.

Communicating Rice Farming

The village has an elaborate and well-developed community-based communication network, whether informal, formal or mediated. Farmer respondents identified nine informal networks with a membership of five to 20 and who meet as often as everyday to once a month. These informal groups were established due to personal relationships, common interests and/or similar reasons. Informal groups based on personal relationships include those headed by prominent residents – Lampong, Nipol and Sawing. Other informal groups are extensions of their formal counterparts such as the Health Volunteers' Group and the Village Fund Group or were organized due to some special interests such as the Money Savers' Group and the Senior Citizen's Group. It should be noted that although all informal networks give special attention to rice farming given the nature of its membership, two networks actually strive to improve rice farming techniques – the Organic Group and Hom Mali (jasmine rice) Group.

Farmer respondents explain that a lot of consultation and debate take place in the village due to the informal networks. Opinion leaders are asked for advice on most farming activities. Farmers and opinion leaders alike likewise have multiple informal networks, i.e., they belong to more than one informal group at any one time. Informal networks also have links to formal and informal networks outside of the community. From these links, community residents update their information on rice farming. Informal networks have also devised means to organize and disseminate these information. Opinion leaders use various communication channels (research stations, extension workers, other opinion leaders, mass media and farmers' organizations) to update rice farming information/knowledge and organize these information in different ways (memory, document storage, classification and retrieval).

Farmer respondents have likewise identified five agriculture-oriented formal groups they are members of – three are community-based (Village Council, Irrigators' Association and Baan Nongsai Farmers' Group) and two province-based (Chainat Cooperative Association and Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives). These formal groups have basically been established to achieve certain objectives – objectives which facilitate rice farming in the village

or province. Their objective may be to lend money to farmers, provide services such as milling and warehousing, ensure adequate water supply for crops, promote organic farming methods, etc. One formal network was the Village Council, which serves as the village's formal link to government agencies concerned with agriculture. These formal networks utilized several communication mechanisms – audio tower, meetings, visits, seminars/trainings, letters, documents, assemblies, telephones, radio announcements and group meetings. They have likewise devised ways to disseminate information on rice farming (audio towers, telephones, letters, etc.) and have outside links (extension officers, Royal Irrigation Administration, cooperatives, non-government organizations, etc.).

Formal communication networks have devised different ways of information organization (memory, computers and manual document storage, classification and retrieval systems). The Village Council members still rely on their memory. They do not take notes or keep minutes of the meetings. The province-based networks and the Baan Nongsai Farmers' Group keep computerized records about each member, especially because they provide loans and need to monitor payment of their loans. The Chainat Cooperative Association also keeps paper documents on its members. With regards to farming technologies, it is only the Baan Nongsai Farmers' Group that stores documents on farming techniques. Members of this network are interested in learning organic methods of farming.

Regarding mediated networks, farmer respondents reported a rich media environment, especially in terms of the broadcast media. With print media, only more than half have access to newspapers and farmers get to read these quite seldom. They read the newspapers to know provincial and national news and to check the lottery results. However, it should be noted that there are a few farmers who buy books to learn the latest farming technologies. Regarding broadcast media, farmer respondents have several radio and television sets (the latter more than the former). Two farmers have 29-inch colored television sets. Farmers listen to radio (up to four hours) and watch television (up to six hours) everyday. They utilize broadcast media for the news, entertainment, relaxation and information on rice farming. Farmer respondents also have mobile telephones (12), VCD players (9), computers (2) and CD players (1).

Collectively Defining Rice Farming

Farmer respondents have generally favorable definitions of rice farming – that is why they continue doing it and will continue doing it. They also view themselves positively as farmers. For these reasons, they continue with various rice farming activities, season after season, year after year. Farmer respondents view rice farming as a good money making venture. They state that the perception that rice farmers are poor is wrong. Farmers, in fact, are proud and independent since they are the backbone of the country, feed the population and continue the culture of past generations. They admit that rice farming is not a glamorous profession and does not allow them to travel to far places but they can choose the best rice to eat – organically grown

or the jasmine variety. Farmer respondents complain about the price of rice and the high price of farm inputs. For this reason, they say that rice farming is also a risky business venture and that it requires skills to be successful in it.

Regarding rice farming paradigms, farmer respondents look most favorably on modern farming since it allows them to plant several times a year and increase their yield. These benefits compensate for the need to purchase farm inputs and to raise capital. In traditional farming, they do not need to spend on farm inputs much but the return is also small. Worse, they can have only one planting season. In organic farming, the yield is quite erratic so they engage in it for personal consumption purposes. They acknowledge that organic methods improve soil fertility and organic products may fetch higher prices.

Given these main definitions of rice farming, farmer respondents generally look favorably at modern means of farming – seed production, sowing, fertilization, land preparation, crop protection, etc. However, they emphasize that they follow procedures similar to those used by their parents. The only difference is that they are aided by modern technologies such as machines and chemicals. There are some farmers, however, who have mixed organic with inorganic means of farming – seeing the advantages and disadvantages of both methods. One complaint expressed regarding modern farming is the effect of chemical agents on their health. Regarding farm labor, farmer respondents admit that family labor has lessened with decreasing family size and exchange labor could hardly be arranged given present cropping intensity. Hence, they see hired labor as the only available option. They likewise see no other option but to raise capital for farming given the need to purchase inputs. However, they stressed that borrowing money is easy and convenient. Regarding marketing, they see the option of selling their produce as planting material (seeds) and not as grains for consumption to fetch higher prices.

Rice Farming Knowledge and Practices

The knowledge and practice system of farmers in the community is vast and extensive – honed from years and years of experience, passed from generation to generation and enriched by technologies and innovations developed elsewhere. Organic, modern and traditional methods of farming co-exist in the community. Farmer respondents, given their preference for modern methods, have opted to plant a few modern varieties rather than just traditional varieties as done in the past. They have developed new methods of sowing and no longer practice transplanting. However, they still use the traditional steps of seed selection and germination. Farmer respondents may use a tractor instead of a water buffalo but they still follow the same steps of plowing, harrowing and leveling.

Farmers may have more sources of water now with the extension of the irrigation canal but they still maintain the same water level. Harvesting may have been mechanized but it still follows the

same procedure. One big change, however, is in the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Farmers have used greater and greater amounts of it. Then, since farmers have greater cropping intensity, they no longer have time to engage in post harvest activities such as threshing, drying, milling and storing. They also no longer utilize rice straw (except for those practicing organic methods) and instead burn these to facilitate land preparation for the next batch of crops.

Regarding farm labor, farmer respondents still have family labor as the core. However, they commission hired labor on a regular basis to augment family labor. Farm labor has also become professionalized since farm laborers have organized themselves into groups and have specialized in certain aspects of the rice farming process. Exchange labor is practiced minimally, if at all. Farmer respondents have many sources of capital and have more options on how to sell their crops. However, they need to purchase farm inputs and contract farm equipment. From their estimates, farmers can earn from 1,400 to 4,140 baht per rai (net income). This indicates great variability in income and hence, shows that rice farmers need to learn financial management skills as well.

Conclusion

What roles does communication play in order to form collective definitions and construct knowledge and practices on rice farming in a community setting? The study answers the question with a discussion of the role communication plays in the community in general, in forming collective definitions on rice farming, and in constructing knowledge and practices in rice farming.

In general, communication plays a role in linking the community to the outside world, providing entertainment and updates on local events, reducing uncertainties in everyday life and building a sense of community.

- *Linking the Community to the Outside World.* Formal communication networks within the community serve as links to government agencies, research institutions and extension offices. Through these networks, farmers visit research institutions, attend government-sponsored seminars, converse with extension workers during home/farm visits, meet with irrigation officials, etc. Through mediated networks, farmers follow national events and developments vis-à-vis weather conditions.
- *Providing Entertainment.* Farmers basically utilize mass media for entertainment, relaxation, to escape from problems and to enliven their houses. Farmers have actually invested on mass media for entertainment – purchasing 29-inch colored television sets and VCD players.
- *Providing Updates on Local Events.* Through formal and informal networks, farmers learn of the latest news in the community, whether or not farm related. During informal gatherings, they speak of life in general, alternative income, family, friends

- and special interests. In formal meetings, they are appraised of the latest developments.
- *Reducing Uncertainties in Everyday Life.* Through their membership in the cooperative and bank, farmers feel assured vis-à-vis capital, emergencies and food. With their cliques, they have a sense of belonging, knowing that they have friends who would help them in times of need.
 - *Building a Sense of Community.* Through social events such as the buad nak *etc.*, farmers build a sense of community and an awareness of who they are. Several farmers could not imagine living elsewhere since their livelihood, neighbors, friends and family are in the community. Others want to live and die where they were born.

In forming collective definitions, communication plays a role in unifying outlooks, resolving conflicts, clarifying issues and concerns, building consensus, and managing power relations.

- *Unifying Outlooks.* Through informal discussions with other farmers, the community forms common views regarding rice farming in general and specific rice farming activities. Basically, they still hold the assumption that rice farming is a worthwhile activity. Hence, they simply need to improve yield and minimize risks. Such is undertaken through applying as needed traditional, modern and sustainable technologies, changing farm labor arrangements, and finding a formula for farm sustainability. They likewise hold common views regarding agriculture-related institutions.
- *Resolving Conflicts.* Through conflict resolution, farmers with opposing ideas and interests exchange views regarding a situation at hand.
- *Clarifying Issues and Concerns.* Communication plays an important role in clarifying misunderstandings.
- *Building Consensus.* Formal networks in the community try to build consensus instead of tackling and forcing farmers to do what they want. For example, farmers in Zone 1 of the irrigation system formed a consensus and sent a petition to the Royal Irrigation Administration to send water to their village. The Administration promptly acceded to their request.
- *Managing Power Relations.* Who does the definition of the situation in the community? Through feedback mechanisms, defining social realities do not emanate solely from community leaders. Leaders, instead, are sensitive to the views of their members.

In creating, modifying and sharing knowledge and practices, communication plays a role in accessing scientific/outside knowledge; preserving, modifying and enhancing local knowledge; organizing, passing and sharing rice farming knowledge; and enhancing cooperation and organization in rice farming activities.

- *Accessing Scientific/Outside Knowledge.* Through formal networks, farmers gain access to scientific knowledge, especially those developed by research centers and promoted by extension workers.
- *Preserving, Modifying and Enhancing Local Knowledge.* Farmers seriously monitor production outputs in their community. Farmers with abundant yield are consulted about their observations and best practices. Farmers regularly exchange notes regarding their methods and procedures. Through these mechanisms, farmers continue, modify and enhance their rice farming knowledge.
- *Organizing, Sharing and Passing Rice Farming Knowledge.* Farmers have designated institutions and residents as guardians of the community's rice farming knowledge. These include the cooperative, irrigators' association, opinion leaders, those who have attended seminars and those who have visited research centers. Farmers, upon encountering a problem alien to them, do not hesitate to approach these guardians. Hence, it should be noted that the community possesses opinion leaders for both organic and modern agriculture. These opinion leaders know of the importance of their knowledge, hence, are aware that must train their successors. In the same light, parents pass on to their children the results of their lifelong experiments in rice farming.
- *Enhancing Cooperation and Organization in Rice Farming Activities.* Farmers in the community know that they share resources. These include labor, harvesters, irrigation system, etc. Hence, they seek advice from opinion leaders and/or play it by ear regarding when to plant so as not to overstretch resources.

In conclusion, the study supports this paper's assertion that rural villages that have developed relatively complex communication systems have extensive local knowledge and practice systems. The village of Sap Som Boon (new name) or Baan Nongsai (old name) has a relatively complex communication system, whether formal, informal or mediated. From their communication system, farmers have developed positive definitions of rice farming and rice farmers. Given these definitions, they continuously improve on their local knowledge and practice system, accessing, evaluating and incorporating innovations and technologies from within or outside the community. The study illustrates that the communication process is both the transmission of information and the exchange/negotiation of meaning.

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