

Towards A New Policy Model for Media and Communication in Post-Conflict and Fragile States



The media and communication sector plays a complex role within post-conflict and fragile states. In times of peace, communication processes can enable citizens to engage in dialogue, serve as platforms for debate, anchor governance reforms, and facilitate poverty reduction and development through provision of needed information.

In conflict-affected states, the communication sector becomes even more crucial in helping to accomplish the vital tasks of managing expectations, building both trust in and oversight of state institutions, aiding the formation of an inclusive national identity, and fostering a participatory and engaged citizenry.

Yet, in many if not most post-conflict environments, media and communication interventions remain just that—interventions inserted awkwardly into the stabilization, reconstruction and development process with little thought given to deep impact. Often, purely tactical and/or expedient choices take precedence over strategic decision making, and the immediacy of the environment presents few opportunities for institutional learning. Most importantly, communication and media sector activities tend to get funneled primarily toward public affairs or public information divisions, rather than treated as fundamental components of peacebuilding and governance within the broader context of post-conflict and fragile state assistance. This mischaracterization of the role of communication can, potentially, lead to lost opportunities and even negative outcomes.

This publication seeks to draw lessons from a variety of donor experiences, focusing primarily on the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) at the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The OTI “case study” was selected because of its relatively long history, unique mission, flexible operational parameters and integrative approach. These lessons point to a new model for media and communication in conflict-affected environments.

A Different Model: The OTI Approach

In their focus on short-term messaging to achieve immediate goals, donors largely fail to view the communication sector holistically. In particular, there is an absence of emphasis on the connective tissue between the interrelated components of media and communication activities, which are important to

long-term reconstruction and good governance. Failure to fully comprehend connections between government strategic communication, message campaigns and behavior change communication, and independent media development can lead to duplicative, low-impact or counter-productive media and communication programs.

OTI has attempted to learn from its past experiences, as well as those of other donors. It has thus elevated the media and communication sector to form an integral, technical component of its work. OTI has also implemented a strategic vision of the communication sector that emphasizes three interconnected categories:

- Using communication to assist humanitarian relief, peacebuilding and good governance
- supporting state responsiveness through strategic communication
- fostering the growth of an independent media sector

Many types of activities fall within these three categories of emphasis. They may include such components as: supporting post-crisis emergency broadcasting that can also deepen public dialogue and foster a more democratic public sphere in the affected region; targeted media civic education campaigns to ensure ex-combatants are aware of transitional assistance and training, skill development programs and their changed role in their communities; training journalists on procedural aspects of war crimes trials or truth-and-reconciliation commissions, as well as sensitivity in covering these issues; or assisting local governments (in conflict-afflicted areas in particular) with outreach to diverse community groups; and ensuring equal access of all groups to government services.

In its willingness to take risks and endure failures, OTI applies something of a “venture capital” approach in identifying promising local partners and projects. This approach is atypical of a long-term

development program, which frequently involves more money, planning and time to obligate funds. Its small size and flexibility allows OTI to exploit windows of opportunity when and as they arise, sometimes combining several of the activities detailed in the following section to ensure a holistic emphasis on reconstruction, governance and peacebuilding.

Failure to fully comprehend connections between strategic communication, behavior change campaigns, and independent media development can lead to low-impact or counter-productive programs.

The Connective Tissue between Categories of Media and Communication Activities

In practice, many donors think about the many communication activities listed above separately – for instance, building an independent media sector or communicating peacebuilding messages. Operationally and conceptually, these are treated as distinct programs; meanwhile, in the field, different implementing NGOs may be responsible for the separate pieces of work. Because of this partition, the connective fiber among these programs remains unrealized in practice, potentially leading to lost synergies and diminished impact.

This is not to imply that the process of developing an independent media and strengthening government communication capacity should be fused. In fact, it is preferable in practice for these activities to be kept separate, with a firewall between government communication and independent media development. Likewise, it is generally considered good practice for independent media sector development to be divided conceptually from behavior change communication or intended-outcome programming. What should be stressed, however, is the strategic nature of planning for communication-sector activities to ensure that the three primary

categories mentioned earlier – communication for humanitarian relief/peacebuilding/good governance, strategic communication, and independent media development – mutually reinforce each other. Ideally, a holistic media and communication program would result in balanced interdependence among these three categories, contributing to overarching goals of reconstruction, peacebuilding, and good governance. The following examples illustrate some of the connective links between these three categories of media and communication sector activities.

Link: Government Strategic Communication and Independent Media Development

Donor initiatives designed to strengthen the independent media sector usually focus on, for instance, training journalists to operate in conflict or post-conflict zones. This training typically includes modules on interacting with government officials who are expected to answer questions professionally, as well as on understanding the role of an independent media within society. Yet at the same time, there may not be corresponding programs designed to support the government's ability to both understand and deal with media professionals who are being trained to ask tough but fair questions. The process of deepening accountability is thus arrested, as journalists find themselves stymied by officials who do not recognize their role, grow discouraged, and possibly quit the sector. Untrained officials may never grow accustomed to the process of information-sharing and lively debate with civil society, and may continue to hoard information and resist attempts at transparency. This leads to further deterioration of the public sphere.

Link: Independent Media Development and Communication for Humanitarian Relief/Peacebuilding/Good Governance

Frequently post-conflict or post-disaster environments present a regulatory or infrastructural vacuum, which can be filled in numerous ways by various actors. Rather than simply focusing on disseminating messages, a holistic media and

communication approach would convey needed information while simultaneously seeding the development of an independent media sector. For instance, emergency radio or television stations, quickly established to fill immediate information needs, may transition into professional media outlets that enhance the development of a democratic public sphere. Moreover, if these stations are being established in a restrictive information environment, they may be difficult for restrictive states to censor when the immediate crisis has passed.

There are also certain synergies between communication for good governance programs and independent media development programs, although these must be carefully handled in order to avoid compromising professional norms in the media sector. For instance, if the goal is to encourage awareness of an upcoming constitutional referendum, programs might include strategic communication to inform citizens of their role in the process and to encourage public dialogue. In addition to simply communicating messages about the referendum, though, journalists could be trained (by a non-government affiliated institution) to cover these types of referenda, as well as the constitution-drafting process. This would then build capacity in the sector as a whole. Radio and other interactive media could encourage call-ins to discuss the constitutional process; this would also develop professional skills among local staff while at the same time accomplishing a strategic communication objective.

Link: Communication for Humanitarian Relief/Peacebuilding/Good Governance and Government Strategic Communication

The ability of a government to enunciate the status of a peace negotiation, inform the public of a new electoral system or demonstrate its delivery of dividends to populations affected by conflict or humanitarian crisis can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of that government significantly, improving its chances of success in a post-conflict or fragile environment. Yet these

strategic communication objectives can sometimes get lost amidst the individual agendas of bilateral and multilateral donors, who engage in their own communication for development activities. A holistic understanding of the complexities of the information space would enable donors to ensure that their own agendas, at the very least, do not interfere with host governments' strategic communication objectives, and preferably work in support of them.

Towards a New Policy Model

For too long, donors have viewed the media and communication sector solely as an instrument toward another end, rather than a target that is itself worthy of support. In post-conflict and fragile environments, this practice manifests itself on the ground in the tangle of banners, signs, radio advertisements and other one-off events designed to broadcast messages rather than engage in dialogue, build institutions and strengthen the public sphere.

Thankfully, this trend is slowly changing throughout the various disciplines that intersect within the communication sector. Specialists in communication for development are beginning to make the case for treating communication as a public good in itself, not merely as a means to an end. Strategic communication specialists are going beyond simple government messaging to incorporate notions of state-citizen dialogue and government responsiveness. Independent media development specialists are also starting to think holistically about the link between the media sector and related programs, like media literacy and citizen dialogue. All three developments speak to the advance of a *structural* view of communication—one that sees a distinct role for the media and communication sector in the key challenges of peacebuilding and governance reform.

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The field of post-conflict reconstruction, however, has been slow to adopt this more structural view of the role of communication. Thus, this paper calls for a new policy model for communication in post-conflict countries. This policy model would make media and communication a technical priority in post-conflict and fragile states, on par with other fundamental building blocks of governance, with its own dedicated financial, bureaucratic and human resources. More specifically, this paper argues that donors must divide their approach toward communication in these environments into two distinct categories: communication as a technical component of peacebuilding and governance, as stated above, and communication as a tool of donor outreach and public affairs. At present, many conflate the two, while in fact they are and should be separate.

There is no doubt that the challenges of post-conflict and fragile states will continue to form a significant part of the global development, governance and security agenda for the foreseeable future. It is in the interests of all concerned to continually re-examine what we know, allowing practices and policies to evolve. In this vein, this paper ultimately seeks to secure a place for open, participatory and independent media and communication processes in the evolution of mainstream thinking on governance and peacebuilding, in the hopes of devising more effective solutions to the challenges of post-conflict and fragile states.

CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

CommGAP is funded through a multi-donor trust fund. The founding donor of this trust fund is the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

CommGAP has launched a blog entitled People, Spaces, Deliberation to share ideas about the role of the democratic public sphere in governance among a growing global community of practice with members who are united in their commitment to improve governance and accountability in developing countries. The blog is addressing issues such as accountability, governance, media development, anti-corruption, post-conflict environments, and public opinion.

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Communication for Governance & Accountability Program (CommGAP)

Development Communication Division
External Affairs Vice Presidency

The World Bank
1818 H Street, NW, MSN U11-1102
Washington DC, 20433

P 202.458.7955 F 202.522.2654 E commgap@worldbank.org

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Complete this form and mail it to

Johanna Martinson
The World Bank, CommGAP
Development Communication Division, External Affairs
1818 H Street NW, MSN U11-1102
Washington DC 20433, U.S.A.

You may also send this form by fax to 202-522-2654, or e-mail to commgap@worldbank.org

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