# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND COMMUNICATION:

## *WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN?*

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# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND COMMUNICATION: WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN?

## ABSTRACT.

For a long time sustainable development projects have claimed a multidisciplinary work approach, a situation in which communication has been the last element to be formally integrated to the field. In this sense, this thesis has the aim to explore and analyze the communication experiences when implementing sustainable development projects in Latin America and more important to examine to what extent communication is a well-understood element for practitioners. Through open-question interviews, a variety of eight institutions which included a selection of NGOs, private and scientific sectors, revealed how they perceived communication within the implementation of their projects. It was found that they shared a common picture of what sustainable development is and how should projects be implemented from the communication perspective, but it was their conceptual understanding that made them catalogue their communication efforts in other areas.  All the interviewees based their communication perspective in the traditional concept: they classify it as a strategy that is related to the spread of information and acts of diffusion.  Nevertheless, they had other sorts of communication principles embedded in their project implementation processes, a statement that raises important discussion questions throughout the thesis.

## BACKGROUND

Sustainable development projects and the area of communication have created a partnership that has lead to a mutual understanding of social processes.  Through actions that include Participatory Rural Appraisal methods and other techniques gathered from social sciences, communication has been appreciated in different levels. Nevertheless, it becomes necessary to understand until what extent communication is embedded explicitly or implicitly in sustainable development projects. The magnitude in which either practices are identified as communication acts *per se* will allow a better analysis of the barriers faced by practitioners when implementing their projects.  In this sense, it also becomes important to question the lessons learned and the common mistakes made during these communicative processes. Along with these practical issues, also come into consideration other elements such as the social context and the academic dilemmas that surround sustainable development projects in Latin America and which will be briefly presented.

### Latin America and its context

Latin America as a region comprises a diversity of countries which differ in racial groups composition, culture, religion types, natural resources, economic tendencies, languages and dialects spoken, just to mention the wide spectrum of differences. Its history reveals the presence of indigenous societies that developed knowledge in a wide range of subjects, from astronomy understanding to the implementation of agricultural systems.  Although these native civilizations clashed with the called "old world" and the process of

colonization left results which we are aware today, there are still some remnants of traditions and identities in the region.

Nowadays, Latin America is facing other obstacles, such as poverty, biodiversity loss, pollution, social instability among other problems. For example, the population living under less than $2 dollars a day comes around to a total of 123 million of people, while those living under less than $1 dollar a day are estimated on a 47 million figure (World Bank Group, 2004). About environmental statistics, "of every 100 hectares of forest lost worldwide between the years 2000 and 2005, nearly 65 were in Latin America and the Caribbean. In that period, the average annual rate was of 4.7 million hectares lost - 249,000 hectares more than the entire decade of the 1990s" (Cevallos 2008). In order to address these problems, strategies are being implemented and which have been in a parallel line to the definition of sustainable development, as it will be explained later. Is in this type of scenario that we can find international organizations, national authorities, local governments, researchers and community members trying to work in unison, although sometimes it is the contrary, they are working as opposing forces.

**Sustainable Development: a brief conceptualization**

The common conceptualization of Sustainable Development (SD) has been the result of a series of international collective reflections and efforts to harmonize human actions with nature, a concept that has been around for many centuries in many cultures and other scientific disciplines. However, the universal idea that anthropocentric activities would have a negative impact on the environment was manifested during the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment celebrated in Stockholm in 1972. But it was until 1987 that the term of sustainable development was formalized by the Bruntland Commission in their strategic report called Our Common Future. In the document SD was defined as the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Five years after this, SD became a more formal political argument during the Earth Summit organized in Rio de Janeiro by the United Nations. In this unprecedented global meeting, 27 principles were reaffirmed in order to secure a global environmental system, including initiatives that would promote conservation, rights, equality and cooperation among others (UNEP n.d.). Organizers proclaimed that "the Summit's message — that nothing less than a transformation of our attitudes and behavior would bring about the necessary changes — was transmitted by almost 10,000 on-site journalists and heard by millions around the world" (UN 1997). Since then, proceedings from these types of reunion have become the "licensed" version of sustainable development, something it must be acknowledge since these official dispositions affect who, when, where and what will be financed.

**The communication dilemma**

As it became internationally institutionalized, the SD definition was also restructured. Mebratu (1998) categorizes the definitions of sustainable development in three major groups which are: (1) the Institutional Version, (2) the Ideological Version, and (3) the Academic Version. The Institutional Version is a mix of official organizations and business perceptions which includes the analysis of needs in three established contexts:

social, economic and biological systems. In this version, a collection of terms such as empowerment, grass root and knowledge make it into the scene. On the other hand, "at the ideological level, although there are some factors that indicate the emergence of a distinct green ideology, the environmental versions of classic ideologies such as liberation theology, radical feminism, and Marxism are the dominant ones." (Mebratu 1998, p. 506). This vision functions as the foundation of the intellectual perspective which discusses in a theoretically level what are the causes of environmental degradation, what are the possible solutions and how the power of social movements become essential in sustainable development. This same author continues with his analysis of what at that time was still the mono-discipline approach towards SD. Economists, ecologists and sociologists working from their respective framework in order to understand processes and solutions, something that soon started to change. Today, multidisciplinary approaches are accepted as a new paradigm within the academic sector. That is why when now we talk about sustainable development it can comprise a variety of subjects such as health, culture, natural resource management, rights, rural development and others.

On the other hand, sustainable development projects in Latin America face other challenges that go beyond definitions. This continental region can be characterized for a multiple set of environmental, social and political conditions. In some places unstable social scenarios, extreme poverty situations, low literacy rates, poor health circumstances and high rates of natural degradation are present. At the same time, Latin America is also considered a rich place in cultural heritage, local knowledge and natural resources. This combination becomes a challenge when trying to implement sustainable development projects. Is in this context of concepts, contradictions and struggles that researchers, institutions, communities and business, in other words society, have to work and live. So when it comes to reality, solutions can be as complex as sustainable development is defined. Does SD require elaborated communication strategies? Because it could be the case, that under this messiness of definition and strategies "simple" solutions are being undermine. Also, other concepts have been recently defined which adds more complexity to the sustainable development formula. For example, sustainable development and communication have fused to create terms, such as communication for development and development communication to address several social processes from a particular perspective. In this sense, it would be interesting to know how communication strategies are managed under the circumstances described above. How are they perceived, as a tool or as a strategy? Are they being used for behaviour change or to enhance public participation? Is it just a mean to give information, raise awareness, build consensus or manage conflicts? But also it would be interesting for the communicative act, to see how people react and assimilate tools for participation, awareness, conflict management and else. In other words, communication within SD is still not a well-understood-element for practitioners, a situation that might be worth reflecting, why theory and practice in this case haven't been able to complement each other.

## AIM

This thesis has the aim to explore and analyze the communication experiences when

implementing sustainable development projects in Latin America. Also it will be important to study how the different institutions interviewed contextualize the communication strategies used in these projects – are they only an appendix or well-thought elements in their planning and implementation process – and to understand the considerations that can derive from either approach.

## METHOD

An extensive search for institutions working with sustainable development issues in Latin America was carried out. Nine individuals were confirmed for the thesis research with whom open-question interviews were applied. It was selected this type of interview since there was the curiosity of how they perceived communication within the implementation of their projects without a need of leading the answers. Was it an explicit or implicit element in their activities? From this premise, all interviews started with the following question: what do you (or your institution) do and how you work with these issues? After reading some theoretical and practical background of sustainable development communication and project implementation, during the interviews it was also made sure that the following items were address: which sustainable developments areas are they working with, conditions for success cases, problems faced and how they were solved, feedback and monitoring, time frame of projects, common mistakes. These questions were not asked directly unless it was sensed that they had not been answered. Towards the end of the interviews a direct question was asked, what are your communication strategies within your projects and institutions? It was deliberately left for the end and as direct question since it would imply their current position of communication and the implementation of their projects. As the interviews evolved from one to another, more elements were added to the following interviews in order to make comparisons. Concerning more technical aspects, the interviews took approximately 1 hour in average and all of them were carried out in Spanish.

## THEORY

*"Without communication there is no democracy, without democracy there is no liberation,"*
Representative of the Italian Government
9th UN Communication for Development Roundtable. Paris, 2004

When it comes to sustainable development and communication theory it is inevitable to talk about definitions in first instance. There hasn´t been a clear definition for communication for sustainable development itself. A wide range of terminology has been used to refer to this practice, such as communication for development or development communication. In this case, it becomes necessary to know the spectrum of definitions since it clearly situates how institutions, organizations and society implement their sustainable development projects and the intensity they grant to communication issues. In the proceedings derived from the 1st World Congress on Communication for development, the base definition for it was taken from the United Nations description as that "process that allows communities to speak out, express their aspirations and concerns, and participate in the decisions that relate

to their development (World Congress on Communication For Development 2007, p. ix) Development communication, the other interchangeable term used, has been defined as a "dialogue-based process entailing the strategic application of communication approaches, methods and/or technologies for social change" (Mefalopulos & Grenna 2004, p. 25). In this same context, development communication is also used to refer to the "process of strategic intervention toward social change initiated by institutions and communities (Gwinn-Wilkins, K. & Mody 2001, p.385). In a way, these definitions have as common denominator the vision that something has to be transformed, but it is in this point that it has to be asked, what has to be changed and how are this changes supposed to take place. What is clear, that at least in these definitions, communication transcends the interpretation of a mere tool to disseminate and send messages.

In this context of social change vs. sending messages, "the field of development communication is dominated by two conceptual models: diffusion and participation. "These models have distinct theoretical roots and differing emphases in terms of program designs and goals" (Morris 2003, p. 225). This differentiation can be of help in order to understand how institutions and NGOs manage and implement communication strategies within their projects, their degree of intervention and what they believe that people should "express". This can point out to a previously discussed subject, how development and sustainable development is defined. In this sense, it will also play a major role the interpretation of these terms since it can influence how approaches, methodologies and theoretical frameworks will be executed.

On the other hand, some terms that have been implied in sustainable development process such as empowerment, participation, decentralization, democracy and non-dependency, have become part of the discourses around communication for development theories, which by the way have also suffer renovations along time. For example when the dependency theory emerged, communication was portrayed "as a tool to educate the people and forge alliances among developing countries" (Mefalopulos & Grenna 2004, p. 26). This was mainly done by mass media means that would be supervised by the state as an authority that would guarantee people´s interest. And along came the modernization concept as well, where the behavior change model dominated communication idea process. In this case, the "different theories and strategies shared the premise that problems of development were basically rooted in lack of knowledge and that, consequently, interventions needed to provide people with information to change behavior" (Waisbord 2001, p. 2).

After these conceptions derived from the diffusion approach, another trend started to emerge and it was participation. This meant that not only the perception of development changed, communication theories also started to evolve from a passive view of the receiver to an active role of them. Silvio Waisbord (2001, p. 15) explains that by the "beginning in the late 1960s, the field of development communication split in two broad approaches: one that revised but largely continued the premises and goals of modernization and diffusion theories, and another that has championed a participatory view of communication in contrast to information- and behavior-centered theories". This participatory focus has been described as the one that "envisions the active involvement of stakeholders in the development process, which is seen not only as a key value in the worldwide process of democratization, but it is also considered necessary to the validity and sustainability of

development programs/projects" (Mefalopulos & Grenna 2004, p. 26). If this is the parameter to authenticate sustainable development programs/projects, to what extent will the institutions interviewed take into account participation? How they perceive it? How they implement it? Do they consider it as a part of a communication strategy? Have they also shifted from diffusion to participation (not meaning that they have to exclude one another)? Or how have they combined these two theoretical approaches?

Since sustainable development is complex by definition, communication in this arena also becomes a challenge. As said before, along with the definition comes a set of concepts that communication has to take care of. Participation, democracy, equality and empowerment are just a few to mention. Each one of these ideas can emerge into an extensive theme for discussion. Considering participation as one of the most important elements within communication for development, it would have to be consider how is defined, what is consider participation and what does communication has to do with it? Defined by Mefalopulos and Grenna (2004, p. 26), "is a process involving two or more parties within which situations are assessed; knowledge and experiences shared; problems analyzed; solutions identified; and finally strategies designed and agreed upon.

Theory can help us understand and analyze reality, but by being an applied activity as well, communication for sustainable development also relies on hands-on experience, failures and successes in the field. In this case, the implementation of SD projects has given invaluable experiences in knowledge about communication processes. During the 1st World Congress on Communication for Development several of these issues were addressed. Challenges were identified for the communication and sustainable development area, and they were as follows:

1. Decision makers' lack of knowledge of and capacity in Communication for Development practice. Their zone of comfort should go beyond public relations and be as well involved in participatory communication.

2. The lack of trained practitioners. A common vision has to be implemented. Different regions interpret Communication for Development in different ways.

3. The lack of political will, as evidenced through absence of policy. In some regions governments make explicit in their development projects, while in others communication is limited to public relations and information exchange

4. The need for partnerships. It becomes necessary alliances among different sectors (academia, NGOs, government and society)

5. Confusion about information and communication technologies (ICTs) and Internet opportunities. It should clearly state the potential and reach as tools for communication for development.
                                 (World Congress on Communication for Development 2007, p. 62)

In this same forum while exchanging experiences and points of view, other reflections pointed out to the necessity of including communication processes from the beginning of

project planning, include participatory communication at national level policies, and also the important aspect of a well-trained communication professional willing to use a wide range of tools and initiatives to carry out effective work. All of these challenges and reflections become important to consider since as being so general, can we think they can be escalated to all contexts?

In this sense, some scholars agree with these conclusions. Why if so important, communication for sustainable development is not taken into account as it should? It seems that communication within this sector it is vision only as a traditional tool to deliver messages and disseminate information. Mefalopulos & Grenna (2004, p.24) point out some explanations which include "from the perception of communication as important but secondary to other more technical disciplines, due to the insufficient empirical evidence of the impact of communication, and consequently, the fact that many policy and decision-makers remain unconvinced of the importance of communication in the development process, at least in so far as concrete action from them is concerned." And here is where it lays one of the major challenges for communication for sustainable development: results. Theory and applied approaches have been occupied on trying to identify elements and conditions within this area. To be able to measure (in a qualitative or quantitative way) how communication for sustainable development works, will be the milestone for the recognition of the importance of this discipline. Wilkins & Mody (2001, p. 391) suggest that "in our efforts to assess the possibilities for communication as a strategic approach to intervention, we encourage more investment into evaluation research, not only of short-term effects but also of long-term consequences, not only of individual projects but also of larger programs and policies, not relying on individuals as units of analysis but also considering social and organizational dimensions".

Concerning Latin America, communication for development is still a marginal discipline. We would have to start with the bigger contexts to understand why this is. Studies in Central America and México have "revealed that communication is rarely mentioned in national policy documents, and that references to participation tend to be associated with rural policy development. When asked about communication, policy makers associate the term with public relations and journalism, while ICTs tend to be associated with the technological dimensions in term". (FAO 2007, p. 6) So if it is not in the political agenda it will neither be present in the scientific community, especially in political systems like this that heavily influence research activities. Communication for development "is not present in the scientific agenda of Latin-American researchers who have been more dedicated to studies about sociology of communication, cultural processes, mediations, advertisement and marketing" (Flores-Bedregal 2001, p.1).

Communication within sustainable development, as it is seen through this theoretical exploration, faces several challenges in the context of Latin America which include conceptual dilemmas as well implementation barriers due to socio-economic-ecological conditions. However, as tough as the scenario might appear we have to be certain that there are countless efforts contributing to development of communities in this region, and that at the same time experiences and lessons are being written down for future efforts.

## EMPIRICAL DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

What are the experiences in communication strategies when implementing sustainable development projects in Latin America? In order to answer this question a multidimensional perspective must become essential. As discussed earlier, sustainable development as a concept illustrates a complex set of relationships which are reflected in the same level when it comes to implementation. Even though the interviewed participants in this research project seem field unrelated to each other, the fact that they work in different sectors but under the same umbrella of sustainable development, gives them common denominators as well as important differences which lead to an understanding of some theory-practice questions.

Nine individuals from different organizations were interviewed; all belonged to different sectors of sustainable development including scientists, private practitioners and public institutions. Next there will be a short profile explained for each one of them in order to understand the variety of perspectives for one same issue. It also becomes important the discipline range of interviewees which includes from theory to practice, since they have always been linked together and they could not exist without the other. In this sense, it was important to have different perspectives of the issue: scientists, managers, etc.

1. **Maria Palselious, Future Earth (*Framtidsjorden*).** An international network supporting initiative in development on the basis of social justice and ecological sustainability. They have more than 20 years of experience working in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay.
2. **Ingar Enghardt, Friendship Association Sweden-Nicaragua (*Vänskapsförbundet Sverige-Nicaragua*).** They work in solidarity with groups in Nicaragua focusing on grassroots campaigns for the abolition of powerlessness and poverty. Their projects promote democratic development.
3. **Gloria Gallardo, researcher at the Centre for Environment and Development Studies at Uppsala University (*Centrum för miljö-och utvecklingsstudier*).** Her research interests include historical-agrarian sociology with special emphases on: agricultural communities, communal land ownership and land tenancy, the institutions of the commons and its survival, rural development, property rights, natural resource management, among others.
4. **Jorge Maluenda and Teresa Miranda Maureira. Orgut Consulting AB**. provides technical assistance to rural and urban project preparation and management world-wide. Their focus is on institutional development, skills transfer and good governance for equitable, sustainable poverty alleviation and improved public service delivery in natural resource, water and environmental management, private sector facilitation, land administration, agriculture and forestry.
5. **Cristián Alarcón Ferrari.** A current PhD student at SLU researching on the structures of political economy, political ecology and environmental communication along with the production of ecological knowledge within forest sectors post-1974 in Chile and Sweden.
6. **Klas Hansson, Svalorna Latinamerika**. Working in Peru, Bolivia and Nicaragua,

the association focuses on issues such as food security and education. Their aim is to support organization in Latin America in their effort for organization and cooperation processes in order to promote their influence on society.

7. **Margareta Lilja, Solidarity Sweden-Latin America (Latinamerikagrupperna).** Their projects are focused on changing structures within society to alleviate poverty and oppression. Their aim is to increase people's participation so they can influence decisions and political Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

8. **Kristina Marquardt, researcher at the Unit for Rural Development in SLU**. Her research interest is within small-scale tropical agriculture based on local natural resources and how to enable interaction between actors and the research process in order to facilitate local land management learning and innovation.

**Is communication an unknown concept within sustainable development projects?**

One of the first intentions within this thesis research was to know if they explicitly worked with the concept of communication. An open question – "explain what does your organization do and how you do it?"– would be the starting point to understand their concept of communication for development and to what extent this was seen as a formal element within their work organization. Interestingly, there was never a direct identification toward communication *per se*, "communication for development", "development communication or neither of its variants. By no means is this an indication that the organizations and researchers interviewed didn't develop such strategies, but it was their conceptual understanding that made them catalogue their communication efforts in other areas, a discussion that will be taken later in the paper.

The interviewees had a wide range of action within sustainable development from rural development, organic farming, sustainable fishery and right issues, and nevertheless they shared key words in their discourses: participation, rural development, long-term and incentives are just a few to mention. In this sense, this might be a representation on how they are perceiving sustainable development and is in this same way how are they using communication strategies within their projects (explicitly or implicitly). It is clear that they share a common picture of what sustainable development is and how should projects be implemented from the communication perspective. In sectors that could be of great contrast like the private and scientific sector –in which traditionally one is more focused on profit and other on knowledge production-, similar key issues seem to be the foundation for their projects: trust and relation-building. And aren't trust and relation-building a matter of communication? Yes, these elements become of great importance since it is precisely this communicative focus which refers to the way you will introduce yourself as an external agent, the manner you will approach people, the way the situation will be analyzed and the awareness of how others perceive you.

At this point an important question surfaces, why such a concept (communication + sustainable development) so promoted by international agencies and without a doubt so important, is not appropriated by these actors? It could be blamed on the lack of knowledge, but at least in these interviews carried out it is shown the high expertise carried out while implementing this type of projects. Could it also be just a matter of labels? You

can call it participation, facilitation, diffusion or PRA methods, but all of them are part of complex communication processes that must be understood fully. So it is more than just labels. The fact that these actors are placing their communication strategies in some other discipline or arena may result in limitation of perspective. If we refer to concepts such as windows of reality and "what we do in this world is a function of how we see it" (Sriskandarajah 2008), this will mean that placing our object of practice in certain scope will permit us to see it in one or other way. There is also a fact which is important not to forget, a reality showing that many concepts and strategies are linked to development agencies which are in charge of allocating funds resources for NGOs. Sustainable Development projects thus require funding, a condition that might structure a strong interdependence between implementation and financial support. In other words, when projects seek funding they will try to "mirror" with development agencies objectives and discourses. Practical experience in this area has shown that some effectiveness can be guaranteed if the "benefactor's language" is used when sending applications for financial aid. So, if your donor is talking about rural development and participation, the surest fact is that the organization seeking funds will do the same. Although this aspect wasn't explored in depth during the interviews, some conclusions can be drawn. With the exception of the 3 researchers, the rest of the interviewed organizations depend on the Swedish Government funding through SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). Are all of them talking in terms of SIDA's discourse? This could turn into a complete research question; nevertheless if we take a quick look at the Agency's homepage we rarely see communication as a major component in their departments, with the exception of their publications in this matter focusing on regions of Africa and the Balkans. So this can be one way of explaining the phenomena. Is this approach by all the institutions influenced by Sweden policies specifically? It could be also a matter of geography; Africa can be pointed out as a very well-known example of communication for development initiatives. This region has attracted international attention for its critique condition, which has led to the implementation of enormous efforts for development. We would also have to remember the marginalization that communication for development faces in Latin America and its slow development in research and policy's agenda. As it was said before, neither the government nor the scientific circles take into account this discipline.

**Participation, campaigning and institutional strengthening**

As said earlier, participatory focus has been described as the one that "envisions the active involvement of stakeholders in the development process. Mefalopulos & Grenna (2004, p. 28) have also recognized this important issue but have gone further. They have grouped development communication into three areas: 1) 'participatory communication', (2) public communication campaigns and (3) institutional strengthening. This division points the different levels in which communication can take place within sustainable development institutions. It could be the communication aspect in the project itself, the approach in which results and activities are expressed to the exterior, and finally how communication can strengthen the very own institution. All the interviewees carried out participatory communication in their projects, but not all of them developed public communication campaigns. With the exception of the researchers and the private establishment, the other organizations besides promoting participation in their projects, a major component was to raise awareness of Swedish politicians and society about the situation in Latin America.

*"For us, we go beyond information campaigns, we are interested in having an impact in international politics which some often is very little address... We, as their allies and knowledgeable about the Latin America context, can have a talk with our politicians of the situation..."*

- Latinamerikagrupperna

This division can be also seen as a reminder of Environmental Communication (EC) discussion brought up by Cox (2006) of collaborative approaches vs. advocacy campaigns. These two approaches trying to classify communication activities within environmental issues become relevant since it points out to the different intentions and which become important for the discussion ahead.

*Participation*. This was the most recurrent word during the interviews. However, what does participation mean exactly? What would be the main aim of enhancing participation? The interviewees vision of participation is "let them decide". Decide about what? Choose about their interests/priorities and about the way they organize and distribute responsibilities, or as one of the interviewees mentioned, "they are owners of their organizations, they are owners of their decisions and they are owners of their results". It comes to attention as well, the words used to refer to the people who they work with in Latin America. In a certain way, this turns into the first impression of how participation is perceived within their organizations. Terms such as friends, partners, collaborators or allies were used as reference which reflects the position of not an outside expert coming to work with them but as a more neutral participation with them.

It is clear that the position of all the interviewees is not to educate people in Latin America but bring them the necessary resources in order for them to express their needs and increase their quality of life. Mefalopulos & Grenna (2004) mentioned that including participation in development projects would validate them. In this case, it is not a failed exam for the interviewees; they have all include it as a major component in their programs. While this doesn't reflect the quality of participation, another element of analysis has to be brought to the scenario and that is active involvement. The perspective to take could be the one given by Walker (2004, p. 213 cited in Cox 2006), defines collaboration as the "constructive, open, civil communication, generally as dialogue; a focus on the future; an emphasis on learning; and some degree of power sharing and levelling of the playing field." This definition becomes importance since it brings up issues that become meaningful for sustainable development and that are not taken into account with the frequency that it should.

Learning and power sharing can be clear indicators that active participation is taking place. Why? Because learning is an influential instrument for empowerment and public participation, in the sense that it can promote meaningful changes. Sustainable development is precisely about this, transformation and adaptation but not only in economic terms and improvement of livelihoods, but also about providing the necessary tools to question and interact with our surrounding reality, an action that can be achieved through knowledge. This can be taken into a step further if we consider learning as the "process of transforming experience into knowledge" and "knowledge as a purposeful and directed activity of

persons who wish to make a difference" (Sriskandarajah 2008). So to what extent the implementation of projects analyzed in this thesis fulfill this premise? The truth is that none of the projects have a direct indicator to measure changes in this sense. Most of the evaluations are focus on concrete and visual results such as the organization of communitarian events, the improvement of monthly income, construction of communitarian infrastructure or the ability of people to carry out independent projects. Due to this fact, the interviewees were asked about their observations and impressions based on visits along different stages of the project or what were the most notable comments they heard from people.

> *"The most important thing that will remain after 10 years of work will be the attitude in the people, which we might say it has reached other levels of comprehension and perception of their own potential and the advantages they have if they work in a more organized way... for example when the Swedish Ambassador in Nicaragua paid a visit to the field, she asked to the woman what was the most important workshop they had attended, and the women without hesitation answered: self-esteem because now we know how much we are worth".*
>
> - ORGUT

Some other answers pointed out implicit activities that can be classified under the Kolb's learning model. From concrete experiences to the active experimentation, it seems that during their project implementation there were included spaces that would enhance learning; we can call it PRA methods, informal reflections, experience exchange events, dialogues, campaigning and so on. However a question arises, will these actions be enough to enable project participants to change how they see their world? Listening to the answers it can be affirmed, but to what extent this can turn into a sustained situation. After all, sustainable development tries to provoke long-term changes. That is why serious evaluations become important, especially like in a mentioned project that after 10 years of intense work with a community it will come to an end. Sure a decade is a considerable period of time, but to what extent will the results persist in time?

In another context, participation should also be valued in the way promoters get involved with their projects. Participation should not occur only at community level but it should also be included on how institutions and researchers participate in their projects. This reflection was set off after one of the interviews. One of the researchers who spent considerable time for her PhD project in Peru was involved not only in observing or facilitating sessions; she was incorporated to daily activities as any other member in the community. In this sense, she referred to this experience as a way to "give something back". She was able to *participate* with them doing field work, sitting with them to have lunch and so on, all of which help her to formulate questions and change her perspective of her own research as well. It could be said about the differences existing between the project implementation process for research and the one for projects in an institution. Although the divergence, this does not exempt NGOs, governments or financial institutions to not get involved with their projects. If we refer back to Sriskandarajah (2008) concept of windows of reality where everyone perceives reality according to their set of eyeglasses, sustainable development projects then should be seen through the same window of reality since this will be the way to really harmonize the different perspectives. This doesn´t imply

that one has to change their windows or perspectives, it could be the case, but the idea is more about development of understanding of the different situations. Also to be able to blend with the community moves the headlights towards other actors, as Waisbord (2001, p. 20) would state about the participatory approaches, "they also removed professionals and practitioners from having a central role as transmitters of information who would enlighten populations in development projects".

*Campaigning*. Although not the researchers, the rest of the organizations interviewed implemented different types of campaigns based in their working projects. All the participants were asked almost at the end of their interviews what were their communication strategies and directly answered about their diffusion efforts. What is significant to point out is that with these statements it appears the continuance of a traditional perspective of communication. So communication is seen as tool to disseminate and send messages through different mediums: internet, print material, campaigns, events, etc. In some sense, they are complementing their participation approach with diffusion practices in their most general sense. The goals are the contrasting points among the organizations. From behaviour change to just information, the strategies applied by each institution attempt to position themselves in the face of society. It is worth of reflecting why, how and what are they trying to communicate to the exterior of their working circle.

The private company has a very well established outreach program about their projects, specifically in one of their most successful cases. In this case, is about presenting changes over time in terms of economic growth, production increment and other changes in the community, all supported by well-designed visual materials. They have this focus since the primary targets of this reporting are the institutions to which they provided technical assistance. And is this key word –technical- that implies "technical communication" reflected on the multiple graphs, statistics and visual aid used in their materials.

What happens in the other organizations? Well, they seem to display other resources for communication since their purposes are focused in three detected areas: 1) advocacy, 2) information and 3) fund raising. Cox (2006) states that advocacy can be perceived as a "tool to attract attention and gain support for a specific cause, policy, idea, or set of values". So when the organizations conclude or are in the process of their projects, it becomes important for them to strategically scale up the information so it can reach higher circles of decision-making. It could be said that advocacy can portray the confrontation angle within communication for development projects but not in the sense of violence and altercation. We need to have in mind that sustainable development projects are immersed in political and economic trends that must be changed. In this case, communication is perceived as a powerful tool that depends strongly on how the information is presented. On the other hand, the scientific sector interviewed perceived communication as a tool but not to convince anyone but more as an approach to give back a contribution. For example, working with fisherman in Chile was a satisfactory experience for one of them and an in that sense it was made sure that the publications derived from the study were delivered to the community. Another example was set when after finalizing a long-term research there was an idea to develop in the future brochures and other materials as part of their results. Then, can we think that researchers must have an ethical duty with their study objects-subjects? Here, we might add a 4th area to the Mefalapulos & Grenna division:

communication for retribution. Communication can focus in enhancing participation, a vehicle to keep in touch with society, but also as way to honor the people that make sustainable development possible, and that is those individuals that engage with the projects and their communities. Yes it's true, it could be discussed that people get independence, power and the means to secure economically their future through communication processes, but they also must earn the recognition for their efforts.

*Institutional strengthening*. Mefalopulos & Grenna (2004) state in this area some characteristic processes such as the internal flow of communication and capacity building (training) on the processes and products of communication to personnel. Though very valuable there is other issue that should be discussed within this section that it's more related on the meaning of sustainable development. In Mexico we have a saying, *in the blacksmith´s house, a wooden knife*, which can be translated to English as the *cobbler's children go barefoot*. What is meant by this? That in issues like sustainable development we have to practice what we preach.  Are organizations working with sustainable development in a coherent way inside their internal working procedures? Do they promote participation among their employees? Are power relations equilibrated? What types of activities are implemented to foster friendly-environment attitudes? It was during the last interview that this point came up. Latinamerikagrupperna, previously known by the name Education for Development Action, has translated its name to Spanish language as "Sweden-Latin America Solidarity". It's from this start that the association marks a clear message of their work nature. They have integrated the vision of solidarity not only for their external work but also in the way they proceed as an organization. The eye-catching situation is the fact that solidarity is promoted among their staff by having the same amount-salary, not having elegant offices, as they would say "not much, not little, only just enough". An important reflection surfaces and deals with the fact that sustainable development projects should start their implementation not when they arrive to a community but from a solid sustainable organizational structure. If sustainable development is about making the necessary changes to promote equilibrium in environment and development, then it should start at *home*.

## Communication within projects, some barriers, weaknesses and strengths

The different projects described during the interviews revealed a series of barriers and strengths linked to communication aspects. One of the first situations that must be reflected is the fact of economical context and the consequences it implies to sustainable development projects and therefore communication.  For example, it is well known that most of these projects are aimed to groups in extreme poverty whose communities are immersed in natural resource degradation.  But what happens with these populations? History has shown that they are target of intermittent government programs and unmet promises. Several social scientists in Mexico have argued that these groups have become suspicious or are just tired of people coming and going out from their communities. In other words, project executors don´t come to an ideal situation, it is not about people being happy when they see strangers with unknown intentions coming into their villages. Then, under this context is that projects have to be implemented. The different interviewees used different strategies to approach the communities who are they working with. The first thing in mind might be trust-building, but before that there can be other steps that can be taken

into account. For example, some of the institutions and researchers prefer to work with already established local NGOs who are very well-known in the area and that have been working for several years with the communities. This means that there has been some trust-building already and that is why so important to become allies between sustainable development projects. Nevertheless, for the analysis purpose of this thesis we might see a dilemma; is this situation a barrier or strength? For projects it is a clear strength since it depicts partnership and a way to work jointly in a guaranteed way.  But for sustainable development, as a process, it might be a barrier in the sense that this could mean excluding those situations where one have to start from scratch, where there is no previous NGOs contact. What will happen to those communities that have been abandoned from government and NGOs efforts? This happens to point out to the poorest communities in Latin America. Why is this said? When asked if they had some sort of selection standards when deciding about the implementation of projects, some of them say yes. The private company for one of their projects had the following stipulation.

> *"One of the parameters used in the selection of the (coffee) producers that would be included in the program was that they would be situated in the line of poverty, that is between $1 and $2 dollars per capita a year…  Other parameters taken into account were the location of their crops, where were they living, and what were their activities…"*
>
> - Orgut

Other institution expressed the same situation: they don't work with communities that are under extreme poverty since it would be difficult work in places where the basic needs are unmet, at least the basic needs have to be met in order to start working. Exclusion or not, this is an issue that has to be considered by sustainable development practitioners and communication professionals, not only as weakness but as a challenge that someone has to address.

Even having the advantage of working in areas where NGOs have already established previous communitarian work, all the interviewees pointed out the importance of trust-building when implementing their projects. And it is to notice that there was a common word: incentives. But not all of them had the easy task to offer some type of incentives. For some of them it was much easier to offer them. In the case of the private company it was clear that they had to approach people with some kind of incentive.

> *"In any kind of development project, if there is no monetary incentive it will be very difficult to change attitudes, due to the fact that precisely is an improvement of their economical situation, that if done with a sustainable approach it is much better…"*
>
> - Orgut

They also included other motivations for participants, they agreed on offering workshops with themes that they would consider relevant. The community asked for workshops dealing with family planning, HIV and legal aspects of their productive activities. However, what happens when you don´t have the economical infrastructure to offer material incentives? This was the case for the scientific researchers. Honesty was a key incentive element for one of them.

*"When international agencies go to rural communities sometimes they come with an offering maybe some type of infrastructure... but us, as researchers we come empty-handed, we might be in a position where we are taking away valorous time from people since our research process includes maybe several days, meetings and so on. So, what are we going do? I think honesty is fundamental... to be straight forward about our work and the possible contribution..."*

- Gloria Gallardo

Other researcher preferred to motivate people by organizing social activities such as lunch gatherings and when possible, give away tools such as "machetes" - cleaver-like cutting tool used widely in farming and harvesting activities. The lesson that can be learned is that no matter how well established is the NGO you are working with or if you just arrived to a new community without previous involvement, the beginning of a project and its first steps are always crucial to guarantee people's involvement. In this sense, it would be important to reflect on human dimensions, it is true that tangible objects can motivate people, but also in order to appeal a human sensitivity can require less than that.

In the theory section it was discussed some points that practitioners in the field of communication for development had identified as major challenges within this area. Maybe due to the fact that the interviewees didn't identify their work as communication projects there have been differences in what they recognized as challenges or barriers. For example, they didn´t mention aspects such as lack of knowledge and capacity by decision makers, the lack of political will or the need for partnership. Yet, they mentioned some other helpful practical observations about their projects. These comments can be translated into two words: adaptation and flexibility. Without these two, sustainable development projects and its implementation might face serious difficulties, and for them to occur it's necessary to think out of the box. One of the situations that best portray this fact is to think that sustainable development projects will only have to promote and execute related activities. But if we have adaptation and flexibility this might not be true all the time. One of the projects implemented, which initially was focused to local producers, as it was developing there was a need to implement workshops that were not taken into account in the first planning. People in the community, especially women, started to ask for self-esteem workshops. This at first can cause doubt in the following sense, if for example people asked about cooking lessons, just because they ask for them they should be implemented? In a certain way this, what might appear as an unrelated activity, may trigger other social processes that as communicators we are not aware of and this is where thinking out of the box applies.

As communication professionals we do not have to be absorbed in terminology such as participation, empowerment, active listening, which with no doubt are very important, but we have to be able to integrate in these elements with other human processes. The concept of Sustainable Development encompasses multidisciplinary approaches in order to implement their projects. There is no wonder why in this type of projects a wide range of professions are involved: biologists, anthropologists, economists who from their different perspectives complement each other. Charon (1995) defined perspective as an angle of reality, "a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at and tries to understand

reality." From this perspective, is communication for sustainable development lacking multidisciplinarity? In other words, are we missing perspectives? We can say that as fresh trained environmental communicators we have been given knowledge to identify perspectives, analyze and understand them, but this doesn´t mean that we are the experts in the situation. Can communication work with other fields? Who can be its allies? How can multidisciplinary approaches enhance communication for development? At some point this disciplinary crossing has been occurring spontaneously. We just have to make a quick observation of what type of professionals are responsible of the implementation of sustainable development projects and its communication strategies. At least for this study and excluding the researchers, there is a wide range of professionals, from activists to sociologists but no communicators. So we have other disciplines implicitly working with communication a fact that has to be taken as an advantage for communicator professionals to point out the importance of communication in this type of projects.

## CONCLUSION

Sustainable development and communication processes have been allies for a long time, but it has been until recent that efforts have been made to officially position them as a formal element. With these new approaches sustainable development practitioners might have limited their vision of communication reach. All the interviewees have the traditional perspective of what communication means, they classify communication strategy as that one having to do with spread of information and acts of diffusion. This doesn't mean that they don´t include other communication strategies within their projects, the fact is just that they are not included in this specific division.

This other communication activities, although not referred as such, could be classified under participation, campaigning or institutional strengthening. Coincidence or not, but all the interviewees envision participation with very similar approaches, as a bottom-up process which are inclusive, active and empowering. The differences can be situated in the scientific sector. For them, they had to use other methods when approaching communities for research purposes, something that was solved with honesty and reciprocal participation. At this point it could be good to question if sustainable development communication can raise new ethical duties for practitioners in this area. Are we obliged to make retributions to the communities we are working with? Not by paying a favor, but to what extent as communicators we get involved with the projects? And this reflection also leads to think that within these thoughts coherence should be added. What other ethical duty that to practice what we preach. Sometimes little details like this will contribute not only to sustainable development issues but also to our perspective. Are we also promoting solidarity within our institutions? Are we supporting bottom-up participation within our co-workers? Are we encouraging active participation among our coworkers?

One of the most visible weaknesses of the projects analyzed was the lack of evaluation in terms of communication. Of course, their results were measured in a number of ways, from data and statistics to the number of events carried throughout the year, but specific evidence about how communication contributed to change democracy, increase participation and

empowerment is still unknown.

Other consideration was focused to think if SD required elaborated communication strategies? It can be said a yes and no as an answer. Of course, complexity is a factor to consider, but as many definitions exist for SD there are that many communication strategies. Complexity is not the word but heterogeneity. From one case to another, local circumstances can be different even within a same country. So what is required is not to follow a communication formula but to have the skills and views to be flexible and adapt it to current situations.

It has been recognized the importance of multidiscipline within SD, but how about communication for development? Can communication combine with other disciplines or most important, should communication turn multidisciplinary? When reflecting on what type of professionals are in charge of sustainable development projects, at least in the interviews carried out, we see a variety of careers. But multidiscipline has always been present in communication studies, what we have to deal with is with the different labels that are assigned for it. That is, there is a lack of unification criteria for similar concepts used. Is this something that has to be fixed? Well, communication for development, development communication, and environmental communication and so on is not a matter of labels. What professionals have to take into account is the clearness of the concepts they are working with, is it communication? Is it information? And so on…

Exploration studies like this one should also be complemented with future insights. For example, it would be of interest to know what the Swedish institutions – responsible of financing these initiatives – think about sustainable development and communication. Most important of all, how locals (in Latin America) perceive these types of projects? Complementary studies may help understand the concept behind communication for sustainable development for each stakeholder involved in processes like these.

Despite all of these constraints one thing should point out.  The projects that were part of this thesis are clear examples that against all odds success can be achieved.  The importance of these projects is not the fact if they used communication as an established concept, but rather how they have changed the lives of the people that participate in them and how this will, fortunately, transcend from generation to generation.

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