

The Limits of Communication

The Gnat on the Elephant

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Abstract

When asked by a Mozambican firm to assist in the development of a communication strategy for the country's Land Law, we had doubts. We had read about the issue of 'land grabbing' in Africa and feared we might become part of that problem. We knew that any communication strategy devoted solely to outreach and public relations would not reach the illiterate farmer. But when the client agreed that the strategy would include a component focused on communicating with and from the small rural landowner, we accepted the contract. We worked well with the local team and delivered the product on time. However, a year later we learned that the component allowing for feedback from rural farmers had been cut, and that the strategy was yet to be implemented. What went wrong? And will the communication strategy do some good, or will it contribute to people giving up land under false promises?

Keywords: communication strategy, Land Law, Mozambique, land grabbing

Where we Began

When we were approached by a Mozambican consulting firm in November 2009 to help develop a communication strategy for a Land Tenure project in Mozambique, we had our doubts. We realized the sector was complex, highly political, and the stage for a global debate on how Africa should use and manage its natural resources. Advocates like the World Bank were calling for economic development through 'agricultural investments', while critics were warning about 'land grabbing' where foreign investors, often supported by African governments, displaced small holders and left them destitute.

We felt that we'd better think twice before diving into something that could be that problematical. We did our homework. We read widely about land in Africa. We sought the opinion of colleagues and considered the options. When we discovered that the man who had asked for our help with the strategy had written some of the best critiques on land issues in Mozambique, we were won over. March 2010, we joined the team for the design of a strategy that only began to be partially implemented by late 2011. What took it so long? While we do not have definitive answers to that question, we do have a practical experience to share and a number of new questions to ask.

In 2009 we published *Communication for Another Development* (Zed Books). Our reflections were meant to guide our own practice towards 'Walking the Talk' about participatory communication. We wrote about the grey zone, where the contradictions

of the development industry leave little room for practitioners to do ‘good communication’. We also flagged what seemed to be a contradiction in this applied field: on the one hand we realized that ‘good’ communication is only possible when it takes place under the context of ‘good development’ – as defined by the Dag Hammarskjöld’s Foundation’s policy of Another Development (Dag Hammarskjöld’s Foundation 1975). On the other, communication has the potential to set in motion actions that challenge and shift the very development context. As practitioners we are constantly confronted with this challenge: if the context is not right, is there scope for communication to improve it, or are we fooling ourselves?

We jumped in to work on the Mozambique Land Communication Strategy using the touchstones we had suggested in the book as our guide: negotiate the terms of reference; try to understand the context; try to gain trust of local team; develop a sense of ownership.

We thought we could shape at least some perspectives, and to some extent we may have. But we suspect we underestimated the power of the large context we were jumping into. Perhaps this is unavoidable?

Part 1. Negotiating and Planning

Land issues are complex. They take place on a stage where different actors play out their interests, often wearing different costumes while masking their main intent. Multiple narratives take place, and the scenes shift depending on the moment. We knew we were playing a minor role in the land theatre in Mozambique, but we had some hopes of shifting the plot.

Norfolk and Tanner (2007) note that since independence in 1975, Mozambican property in land has been vested in the state and no land may be sold, mortgaged, or otherwise encumbered or alienated. Meanwhile, local traditional land management systems remain the *de facto* management system, as formally recognized in the 1995 National Land Policy and subsequent 1997 Land Law. In the context of existing basic constitutional principles, the legislators and the requirements of a market economy, the new land policy “seeks to protect existing rights, while also promoting private investment and, to this end, seeks to provide secure land rights for investors” (*ibid* 2007: 5).

The literature on land tenure in sub-Saharan Africa is daunting: large tracks of land are being handed over to foreign investors for commercial production of food, fuel crops and fibre or for mining interests, under a myriad of transfer mechanisms. Some lands are also being acquired for conservation. The World Bank refers to this as ‘agricultural investment’, while critics refer to it as ‘land grabbing’. Estimates range from 20 million hectares between 2005-2009, to 45 million in a World Bank 2010 report (Borras, Hall, Scoones, White, & Wolford 2011).

While it appears there is little to stop this phenomenon, what is at the heart of the debate is the question as to who wins and who loses and through what mechanisms (Cotula 2011). Proponents suggest the focus is on intensifying production in under-utilized land, referred to as ‘reserve agricultural land’; and have developed a Code of Conduct – albeit voluntary – to protect rights. Critics argue for the need to talk about ‘land sovereignty’ in a broader, pro-poor framework and question how such lands are identified as under-utilized (Borras & Franco 2010). What remains alarming is the evidence that these large

investments are often not policed in any way, thus leading to people being displaced from their livelihood (Murry Li 2011) as opposed to agricultural support focused on improving their existing production systems (Holt Gimenez 2011).

We had worked in Mozambique before, developing a communication strategy for the new National Water Policy in 2001-2002. At the time, we were aware of the political and bureaucratic challenges to be faced to make sure our approach would be realistic. We have reflected about this experience – and its limitations – in an earlier publication (Ramírez & Quarry 2004). We realized that ultimately a communication strategy often echoes a government agenda or is modified to fulfill a project implementation milestone no matter what other emphasis the formulators may hope to deliver.

We talked this over at length and decided that we should ‘practice what we preach’ and begin with the first Touchstone from our book: negotiating the Terms of Reference with care. After three months of back and forth conversation, we reached an agreement with our client allowing us to design a strategy with a strong horizontal and bottom-up component, where communities would be made aware of the land law and could voice their concerns when implementation problems arose. In retrospect, what we failed to take into account was the weakness of the land administration system, which would make it almost impossible to get any action on complaints.

We emphasized the need to work with and train a local team already immersed in the context. We hoped for a sense of ‘ownership’ of the strategy. Experience had also taught us the importance of gathering the right information before landing in the country. We congratulated ourselves on being able to do this with the local team over Skype and truly felt that this time we might have got it right – beaten the odds towards developing a communication strategy that might reflect the needs of the program.

Our client was a Mozambican consulting firm led by a lawyer with a strong track record in this field. It is his critical writings that gave us confidence, as they raised most of the issues causing our concern. He made sure that all of our requests were accepted into the final contract. The Maputo firm was however associated with a UK-based consulting company that had been awarded the implementation of this project. The consulting consortium had a contract with the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), the unit inside the Mozambican Government accountable to the funding by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) in the United States². These layers of agencies turned out to play an important role in our strategy. In hindsight, we did not sufficiently appreciate their importance when we negotiated the Terms of Reference.

Context and Background

Mozambique has a landmass of some 80 million square kilometers, of which 36 million is arable land. Overall responsibility for land administration lies with the Ministry of Agriculture through the National Directorate of Land and Forests (DNTF). The Mozambican Land Law developed in 1997 is considered an important example of innovative land law reform in Africa. Established through a lengthy consultation process, the law embraces both traditional and modern forms of land tenure. Central to the law is the preparation of land titles that confirm a user’s right to use a piece of land (DUAT or ‘direito de uso e aproveitamento da terra’ in Portuguese). Since land in Mozambique is owned by the state, such a certificate constitutes a lease.

To obtain a DUAT title, several steps have to be covered that include delimiting the land (different variations exist for communally used land vs. individual plots), registering the delimitation, and issuing the land title or the certificate in the case of local communities. If a community wishes to negotiate an agreement for a private investor to have access to its resources, there are a series of consultation procedures to follow. While this may sound straight forward, the implementation is mired in complications, some technical, many political. Today there are disagreements about the fairness of the consultation procedures, especially for communities who wish to cede their rights to an investor, or create community DUATs (Calengo et al 2007).

All parties agree that people need to be made aware of their rights, as per the Land Law, and to the procedures it calls for in securing existing DUATs or obtaining a new one. In 1997-1999, immediately after the 1997 Parliament approved the new Land Law, over 200 NGOs, churches and academics got together to launch a massive Land Campaign which resembled a spontaneous social movement. Civil society was motivated by the belief that all citizens should have knowledge of the law in general, but particularly by the fact that there would be recognition of rights to land occupation on the basis of oral proof.

By 1999, a total of 114 of the 128 districts and 280 of the 385 administrative posts existing in the country had already been covered. Around 15,000 volunteers had been trained as activists in the Land Campaign, including young people, priests, pastors, evangelists, teachers, extensionists and NGO workers, in an authentic movement of national unity (Negrao 1999).

The Land Campaign had been designed and implemented by numerous NGOs during a period of widespread multi-stakeholder dialogue, and had led to the establishment of Provincial Land Fora with the aim of having adequate representation from all sectors. That campaign set the bar for a communication initiative still remembered and talked about to date. We hoped that what had happened once could happen again, or at the very least set a standard for public inspiration.

By the time of our arrival in Maputo, in April 2010, there were plans afoot to establish a new government-created national consultative Land Forum, but they had not yet materialized. We soon found that not only was our work taking place in the absence of a proposed Forum of some kind, it was now led by a dominant government and donor program with a much diminished civil society sector: government, not NGOs, would drive the proposed new Forum. The context had shifted. The new Consultative Forum did not get established until September 2010³. It became operational several months later at a meeting in Maputo in March 2011- one full year after the design of the communication strategy.

Part 2. The Strategy

Preparation

We signed the contract in February 2010 giving us two months to acquaint ourselves with the Mozambican team over Skype. We listened to their stories of communication research already underway. We proposed and agreed upon new tasks to get us up to speed upon arriving in the country. We were adamant that the team be ready to cover much of the research that is fundamental to planning a communication strategy. At the end of each conversation, we would e-mail a summary of agreed tasks.

We truly felt that we had done our best to circumvent some of the same problems we had encountered during our earlier work in Mozambique. Looking back, the amount of preparatory work we expected from a small team that we had never actually met in person is astonishing. The fact that the team cheerfully managed long lists of instructions (and then some) is testament to their commitment and enthusiasm.

Building Blocks

We based our methodology on a set of guidelines we had prepared earlier for a multi-lateral agency, and adapted them. By providing our client with a methodology, we felt we could convey some of the foundations of this applied field. We stressed that: There cannot be participation without some form of communication (...) “Communication is not about broadcasting messages to passive audiences; it is about giving people the tools to take control over their lives and broaden the choices they have.” (Ramírez & Quarry 2010a: 2)

We underlined that a carefully planned and researched communication strategy would address several purposes: to involve people in decision-making; to access people’s views; to facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue; to build capacity and understanding; to listen to others; and to share information.

We emphasized the need to combine different communication functions from the start. For example, it has been pointed out that in the context of land, the law will be imposed but the instruments to enforce the law will need to be amended during implementation. Thus, clear advice, instructions and information are needed, but so too are feedback loops able to convey problems on the ground.

With this in mind, we proposed the following functions:

1. Policy communication and public relations (focus on spreading the word about the existence of the Law and the present focus of this particular project)
2. Educational communication (to teach various groups how to implement the law and support existing capacity building efforts⁴)
3. Participatory and advocacy communication (the focus – an interactive process between land-holders, i.e. communities and small farmers, providing space for information and feedback)
4. Organizational communication (to enable the coordination of different components and different organizations)

We did require a significant amount of assessment work. We also agreed that the local team would draft the strategy with our guidance to make sure they would have a sense of the role of the *communication functions* driving each component (or ‘Pillars’, as they appear in the strategy), and thereby be able to adjust the strategy as needed in the future. After this process was completed, one of our team members asked us why we had made them go through so much work. We joked that the approach was called *participatory suffering*... but explained that its purpose was to let them learn how to produce a strategy and gain ownership over it.

Timing

The volcano eruption in Iceland in April 2010 forced us to arrive five days later than planned. Upon arrival, our team informed us that we were to continue traveling north, as the original schedule of meetings in Nampula could not be changed. The biggest surprise came right after, in the form of a question they were clearly keen to ask: *Could a communication strategy be designed, but not put into implementation right away?*

We knew that the government had not yet been able to establish the Land Forum, but did not realize that the Forum was considered to be the benchmark for initiating what everyone kept calling ‘the need for outreach,’ *the* platform for negotiation. The communication strategy was expected to coincide with the opening of the Forum. Our first thought – especially after so much preparatory work – was: *why then are we here at this point in time?*

The answer to this question is a typical illustration of the development business’ insatiable need for deliverables. Major projects are designed according to preconceived benchmarks or ‘deliverables’, to which funding is attached. In this case, the design of a communication/outreach strategy was itself a deliverable for the next phase of the project implementation (with funding already agreed upon and signed). There was no flexibility about changing this – the project called for a communication strategy at a specified date, and the company had to produce it – never mind that the timing was not right. We had seen it before: the ‘delivery fixation’ means that communication products, e.g. a project newsletter, must be produced to meet the demands of a Gantt chart, regardless of a context that may not be ready for it. This is a planning approach locked on a blueprint, which prevents adapting to inevitable change.

A further intervening issue – beyond our initial appreciation – was a wider disagreement between the donors, the consulting group and the government agencies regarding the need for substantial land administration reform. Had this been settled, coupled with pilot implementation as a way to improve administration and procedures, our communication work would have found a more responsive home.

Trust

The Nampula trip was important since it allowed us a visit to the communities that needed to learn about the Land Law and to meet with some of the NGOs that had given legendary support in the early days of land reform. In our heart of hearts, we all knew that the key to a successful communication strategy would be the ability to reach the men and women in the rural communities who needed to know about the 1997 Land Law, to grasp the benefits of registering their parcels of land, and to understand the rights embedded in the law clearly.

This process calls for more than ‘outreach’ – understanding the messages would not be enough. An illiterate farmer confronted with this information has to trust the messenger; she needs to be able to ask questions and flag concerns. An investor may not need this much support, but rural people certainly do. They also need to have a venue for their stories to be heard (both good and bad), and government must hear these stories to make adjustments accordingly. This, we reasoned could best be facilitated by local NGOs working with community radio stations, so prevalent in the country.

The team, already familiar with the NGOs in the area and with the government personnel, introduced us to a variety of communities, NGO activists and local media units. All expressed interest in reviving the thinking behind the 1997 campaign and all wanted to participate. After discussion, we proposed that the work be granted through competitive bids, as a way to attract champions, especially local NGOs with a background in the Land Law that could team up with local media organizations⁵.

From Communication Functions to Communication Strategy Pillars

Back in Maputo, we learned that the clients of our clients (MCA) and the National Directorate of Land and Forests (DNTF) viewed communication principally as ‘public outreach’. In their mind, the focus was to be placed on getting the project known, or public relations. But we knew that ‘outreach’ via mass media would be insufficient: what was needed was the ability to create an environment for rural users where trust could lead to learning.

We suspected that part of the emphasis on ‘outreach’ could be due to lack of understanding of the functions of a communication strategy and their attendant requirements: the need for research into audience needs, the importance of using specific references to local needs. Part also could be the overall intent of the MCC Land Tenure project: to make it less cumbersome for large investors to purchase tracts of land and, in their thinking, thereby get the economy moving.

To circumvent the emphasis on outreach, and offer something that would satisfy both the client’s view and what our team felt was the main focus of the strategy, we decided to design an approach that would encompass three main pillars: 1. action on the ground; 2. capacity building; and 3. coordination, public outreach and public relations.

Pillar three, the public relations component, was straightforward. MCA planned to work the media to raise public knowledge about the project, its aims and objectives and to let ‘people’ know about the need to register land. Pillar two, capacity building, dug deeper. Mozambique had a system of training local cadastre technicians who worked at the district level to assist in land demarcation. There was talk of developing a cadre of local ‘barefoot’ technicians who might play this role at the village level. Here we visualized a merge with Pillar One, seeing the ‘barefoot’ technicians as possible activists at the community level.

Pillar One was our Trojan horse. Not only did we hope to focus on community knowledge and application of the Land Law, but also that action on the ground would provide a feedback mechanism to bring the community stories and implementation problems back to the centre. Well aware that this component might receive the shortest shrift from the client, we hoped that it would be acceptable within the overall framework.

Testing the Waters

Every consultancy we have undertaken in Mozambique has culminated in a final presentation to a wide array of interested parties. This was no exception. Our work schedule was tightly bound around the dreaded date of April 26, 2010, when the top brass of MCA and DNTF would assemble to hear our story, together with representatives of donor agencies involved in land issues: FAO; the Dutch Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS); NGOs involved in the Land Law, technical people; and the imple-

menters from Britain and Mozambique. We would be meeting some of the top people involved in the process, many for the first time.

During the presentation, we emphasized some of the principles that guided our strategy: readiness and flexibility, the importance of listening, and working with those who are trusted. We outlined how different communication functions guided each pillar. We believed passionately in what we were saying and felt quite capable of answering many of the questions that arose from the floor. However, we had not been able to meet with the top government people from MCA or DNTF one on one. DNTF was in a weakened position, having lost its director a year previously, with a new appointment pending. The top MCA staff had not been reachable so we were flattered that they made it to the presentation. Mostly the questions were mundane, more about detail than substance. We left the meeting feeling optimistic; we had got through it and not been totally shot down.

Participatory Suffering

In the taxi back to the hotel, we came up with the idea of asking the local team to take the first stab at drafting the strategy in Portuguese. This would solidify their sense of ownership over the ideas. The strategy would be in their words (rather than ours) and we would only provide oversight to ensure that we had all been on the same page during the course of the consultancy.

Many weeks and many back-and-forth's later, the strategy was delivered according to deadline. For a long time nothing happened. Eventually a set of questions from MCA did come back. Responding to them in detail took a substantial effort. While many more details still needed to be ironed out, namely the management structure, budget allocations, and Terms of Reference for different contractors, the deliverable had been delivered. Payments were made. But what in heavens name happened to the actual implementation of the strategy?

Part 3. Reflections on the Implementation

When we started this communication strategy, we hoped that it would contribute to a pro-poor implementation of the Land Law. We put emphasis on Pillar One so that the strategy was not simply about 'outreach', but about effective 'conscientization.' We also included a feedback component to ensure that the inevitable problems could at least be noticed, if not rectified. Learning by doing and improving from mistakes is not that revolutionary in the management field. Communication, after all, is a two way street.

After we delivered the report, a full year went by and nothing happened. Along with many of the other preparatory documents, the strategy stayed on a shelf. Inquiries sent to Mozambique came back with answers like 'no idea', 'never heard of it', 'no one mentions the strategy', 'the strategy may be irrelevant'.

Meanwhile, one of the local team members went off to university in Brazil; and the other two to university in Mozambique. By this time, the Mozambican firm had left the consultancy and the head of the British company had resigned over disagreements with how the project was being implemented – so much for ownership. Are we all familiar with this story?

We began to ask ourselves some serious questions. This time we wanted to do more than shrug our shoulders at yet another moment gone off the map. We had become hooked on the dilemma of poor landholders in the midst of growing corporate and political elite interest in African land, and couldn't let it go. We continued to dog our colleagues hoping for updates and glimmers of hope.

Context

We understand that context matters, and wrote a chapter about this in our book (Quarry and Ramírez 2009). In many ways, we thought we had this covered. As we said, we read voraciously before we left for Mozambique. We worked with a local team well versed in the local context, and we listened carefully when we were there. In hindsight, we see that we neglected to truly understand the politics around the issue and did not take into account the fact that politics is a constantly shifting landscape. You just can't go to a place for less than three weeks and expect to get up to speed. This made us think again about the importance of *champions* – the people who live and work in a country over decades and are able to immerse in the context. We were not champions – far from it. While we might have found the champions amongst our local team, we didn't stay around long enough to understand the complexity nor did we consider that our 'champions' were themselves at the mercy of the changing context.

Intent and the Business of Development

We revisited the documents and started to ask ourselves further questions. What, we wondered, was the original intent behind the inclusion of a communication strategy? What had MCA, DNTF and MCC hoped to achieve? Did they actually want to reach the rural poor, or did they hope that a revitalization of the Land Law would pave the way for investors? Was the communication strategy really part of this plan?

While we realize there is no one answer to questions like these, our review of the MCC mandate in Mozambique and what is known as the 'Compact' agreement between MCC and the Mozambique government helped us draw a few conclusions.

The compact states clearly that the projects are intended to foster investment and increase economic opportunities for Mozambicans – allegedly for both rich and poor. The objective of our project, the Land Tenure Services project, was to "establish more efficient and secure access to land by improving the policy framework; upgrading land information systems and services; helping beneficiaries meet immediate needs for registered land rights; and better access to land for investment."⁶

We realize that nothing is ever homogenous, and clearly there was a wide mix of interests behind the intent of the communication strategy for the project. Nevertheless, failure to lead with the original intent of Pillar One, especially when the decision was made to eliminate bottom-up communication, indicates a lack of support for the small and marginalized versus a deeper commitment to private investors. As communication practitioners know, an outreach and public relations approach may work with large corporations, but will not reach or touch the poor farmer.⁷ Moreover, local observers today wonder what the real intentions are behind the new Forum, as the push to issue DUATs seems to have the interest of investors in mind, with questions about the commitment to keeping communities informed about their rights.

Readiness

We were first contacted to consider this communication strategy late in 2009 and began the negotiations in January 2010. There appeared to be a great deal of pressure ‘to get the communication design done.’ Clearly this was all part of an agreed project schedule and set of deliverables that project managers did not dare alter. Such is the business of the development. In our original methodology we included caveats about readiness, such as: “Another form of ‘readiness’ is the stage of development of the program/project. If, for example, a government is about to launch or promote a new policy, it is critical that all the pieces required to respond to that promotion be in place prior to the communication launch. This is a very basic criterion long since understood by marketing professionals knowing there was no point in promoting a product that was not readily available to the public” (Ramírez & Quarry 2010a: 16).

In Mozambique, the de facto point of readiness for a communication strategy was to be the launch of the new Land Forum, even if government-run. Why then was the design of a communication strategy a concrete ‘deliverable’ when its implementation hinged on the Land Forum that was nowhere in sight? The answer lies in the fixation to adhere to pre-determined deliverables; plans are developed without the involvement of the people affected. Donors try hard to plan ahead and anticipate every need and seldom take into account the fluidity of reality.

As mentioned before, there were also fundamental disagreements about the need for a viable land administration system. Meanwhile, the only concrete material the project had accomplished was a shelf full of assessment documents, which didn’t have much meaning in the context. The British company knew that they had to start fieldwork (demonstrations, land survey etc.) to bring policy to life, but even that didn’t happen until October/November 2010, while the communication strategy document was finished in May 2010. While we had flagged ‘readiness’ issues in our methodology, it seems we had walked right into our own trap; worse, the overall project was mired with disagreements about when and how to initiate work on the ground. There was no sense of urgency, so we focused our attention on finding ways for the team to assume ‘ownership’ over the design process itself.

Ownership

We understood well that our clients (and most particularly, the government) had to feel a sense of ownership over our work for it ever to see the light of day once we had gone. While we found almost instantaneous rapport with the local team, sharing hopes, fears and objectives with them without effort, we did not do so well with the larger donor and the government officials. This is where the layers of partners came to haunt us: we negotiated with one level, but they in turn were mired with complex relationships up the ladder, levels where we had little to no access. We had pinned many hopes in our methodology, but the bigger picture was constantly pushing us back.

Due to our short time frame and efforts to meet as many people as possible while we were in Mozambique – principally those from the former Land Campaign, we fell short of meeting with major political players. We see that this was a mistake. There was no champion amongst MCA or DNTF to grasp the design and emphasis of the strategy, to bring it to life, to keep it on track as conditions changed without losing sight of the

principles that guided it. Having said this, the one member of our team that has now come back from her studies to be involved with the strategy again gives us hope; her enthusiasm and commitment are testament to the value of the *participatory suffering* approach.

The Power of Demonstration

In late 2010, the government had announced the intended formation of the long-anticipated Consultative Forum on Land. In February 2011, land administration teams in the north began land registration. In March 2011, the government held the first Forum meeting. In May 2011, we received mail from one of our former team members. She had gone back to work with the British implementing company to help dust off the communication strategy to use it in the new registration campaign and try to move things forward. Her tone was ecstatic. We were pleased, but also cautious. Our reflections on the issues discussed here had made us skeptical. Would MCA actually deliver a communication strategy that would encompass more than ‘outreach?’ Would Pillar One disappear?

We learned that the Terms of Reference for implementation were being revised to send to tender for companies and for NGOs. We wondered: would they be compatible for NGOs or would they favour mostly large companies and firms? Would the feedback function be kept?

We did learn that the feedback component of Pillar One, where stories of achievement and of abuse would be collected and fed up the system, had been cut. We have also been advised that even other projects that encourage associations of farmers to negotiate contracts with large investors are well aware that there is no policing of the promises made. In other words, some donors willfully turn a blind eye to the lack of accountability.

As we write, we still have a number of questions: when abuse does happen, how will it be known and how will authorities be able to rectify it? Given that any large endeavor of this nature will have unexpected consequences, how then will the strategy ‘communicate’ these, when the attention is mainly on ‘outreach’? Did we fail to engage the major actors in Mozambique (MCA, DNTF) about the importance of this element, or did they reject it with a clear understanding or under the spell of deliverable fixation?

Conclusions: Touchstones-*plus*

On 28 July 2011, a large celebration was held in the Municipality of Monapo, Nampula, to award DUATS with national authorities present. The one original member of our team still involved with the project reported this happening with enthusiasm: the strategy was starting to bear fruit. A theatre play had been commissioned to illustrate the case of an investor who is advised by an ill-informed or ill-intentioned local leader that he can grab land from farmers with little difficulty. In the happy ending, the farmers become aware about their rights and obtain DUATs to resist the attempt.

Our colleague currently involved with the strategy writes: “Only now people from the project are understanding the importance about the land communication strategy about outreach activities. People from the project are recognizing that we can have more and good project results if the outreach activities are in place in the field” (note from Mozambique, with minor edits).

Writing this article has allowed us to reflect and learn from our practice. This process is painful in two ways: it exposes weaknesses and mistakes, and it also illustrates how challenging it is to be true to the principles of our field when operating within the confines of the development industry: *provide channels for people to talk to one another; help them decide the direction of their own development and to raise their own voice; listen before telling.*

When we negotiated our Terms of Reference for this consultancy, we wanted to make sure that the project would not be only about ‘outreach’, but also about ‘communication’. We felt it was worth trying to shift the context. We had the right team, the commitment was there, but in the end did we use the wrong language? We advocated for ‘participatory communication’ knowing full well that this is something that governments and donors will avoid. It is messy and often calls for changes in plans. We had argued this at the World Congress for Communication for Development (WCCD), concluding that the best role for government would be to provide the space and the support for NGOs to manage such processes (Quarry 2006). We still support this view, hence the wish for strong NGO involvement in the communication strategy implementation. The management field is flush with examples of learning by doing, of adjusting the course as inevitable mistakes happen. And yet, we know that individuals, governments and large agencies are wired against learning from mistakes (Harford 2011). A project of this magnitude, with a strategy that emphasizes ‘outreach’ but excludes feedback, is not what we had aimed for.

We need to maintain a balance inside a continuum that has stubborn principles of participatory, pro-poor development at one end, with total cynicism of the development industry at the other. On the one hand, most institutions use the language of pro-poor development, yet this is accompanied by a conviction by some that economic development will require large corporate investments, without a clear strategy to protect the poor. This is the crux of what is happening in many countries and it is reminiscent of the colonial era, where plantations were the driving force for economic development at the cost of widespread displacement of farmers from the land.

Those like us advocating for a land sovereignty approach see it differently. Requirements for a pro-poor land policy include class and historical consciousness, gender and ethnicity sensitivity, rights security, the increase of productivity and the enhancement of livelihoods (Borras & Franco 2010: 32).

A communication strategy is insufficient to achieve these requirements; a significant land tenure policy and political commitment is necessary to address them. While many of the above items are included in the spirit of the Land Law, we are less confident that there is a political will to attend to them in the current environment. Add to this that a large project compact is packaged within the ‘deliverable fixation’. A communication strategy committed to a pro-poor emphasis can easily be revised to fit more instrumental ‘outreach’ goals.

Our touchstones may have given us the impetus to give this work our best try, yet they are insufficient to undo such complex structures and vested interests. As mentioned above, no government is homogeneous; there will be some committed to the Land Law and to issuing DUATs for sincere reasons, while others may be concerned that the procedures will slow down implementation and discourage large investors. This is the grey zone we worked under, often times with the illusion that our strategy would be the Trojan horse for participatory development (Ramírez and Quarry 2010b).

As we write, we have not given up hope. We are still hopeful that some contracts will be awarded to NGOs and local media; we were pleased that one NGO (the Instituto de Comunicação Social) was to be involved with the regularization campaign in peri-urban areas. We are not aware of local NGOs getting contracts for the more demanding rural campaigns. Many NGOs will recall the Land Campaign and will do their best to emulate it. Our key champion at this point is the only member of our team that is still on the ground and committed to the strategy. She has gained an enormous amount of experience and skills through this process, and given the strategy, the continuity that keeps us hopeful.

Our touchstones guided our methodology, but the big picture came back to haunt us. Can a communication strategy contribute to changing the context, or do we patiently wait for good development to magically appear before offering our services? The jury is still out and we are not sorry we tried.

Notes

1. Wendy Quarry (e-mail: quarrywendy@gmail.com) and Ricardo Ramírez (e-mail: rramirez@uoguelp.ca) are independent consultants based in Canada and co-authors of *Communication for another development: Listening before telling* (London: Zed Books, 2009).
2. In June 2007, the Millennium Challenge Corporation signed a five-year, \$506.9 million Compact with the Republic of Mozambique aimed to increase the productive capacity of the population in the Northern districts, with the intended impact of reducing the poverty rate, increasing household income and reducing chronic malnutrition in the targeted districts. The four projects are designed to foster investment and increase economic opportunities for Mozambicans.
3. Officially named Forum de Consulta sobre a Terra.
4. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), for example, has a long-standing program to support the Centre for Juridical and Judicial Training (CFJJ) that provided training to paralegals (see http://www.fao.org/docs/eims/upload/269270/CB_CaseStudy06_Mozambique.pdf). We understood paralegals to be the equivalent of barefoot doctors, and as such, potentially important actors in linking with local communities. Paralegals could be a more sustainable link compared with communication campaigns that come and go.
5. At the time of writing we did not yet have confirmation that NGOs had secured any of the bids.
6. <http://www.mcc.gov/pages/countries/program/mozambique-compact>
7. The Land Campaign success was built on a horizontal participatory approach.

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