

COMMUNICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT- A CLOSE EXAMINATION OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF COMMUNICATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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What is communication?

Communication is a basic need of any human being. It's how we find expression for our thoughts and emotions. Homo Sapiens have found avenues for expression from time immemorial.

Even in pre-historic times, communication marked humanity's evolution timeline. From pre-historic cave paintings that go back more than 35,600 years, to Egyptian hieroglyphs from 3200 BC to the revolutionizing of human communication by Gutenberg's first printing press developed between 1436 and 1450, human development has witnessed improvements in leaps and bounds.

The need to send messages from one person to another, one place to another lead to the birth of the postal system. According to historians, the first legitimate postal service likely originated in ancient Persia around 550 BC. The postal service established in 14 AD by the Romans is believed to be the first well-documented mail delivery system in the western world. However, India and China had some form of postal system already in place by then.

If perishability and geographic limitation marked human-to-human communication through all the above- from cave paintings and post offices to books, what marks today's communication tools is its ability to reach all the continents in a fraction of a second, at the click of a button.

The advent of internet has made communication almost instant.

Media critic and theorist James Carey defined communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" in his 1992 book "*Communication as Culture*," assuming that our reality is defined through experience-sharing with others. The

common entities in any communication are - the sender, the receiver, the message, and interpretations of meaning on both sides.

According to Allen Louis “communication is the sum of all the things one person does; when he wants to create understanding in the mind of another. It involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening and understanding”

In short, we exist to communicate. It defines the very essence of human existence.

When we fail to communicate what is required, it leads to failure- failure of families and relationships, collapse of organizations and governments and even destruction of the entire planet.

Communication involves a sender, a receiver and a message. When the receiver takes relevant action based on the communicated message, the communication is deemed successful.

Before examining the need for communication in sustainable development, it's important to define sustainable development.

What is sustainable development?

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Sustainable development has environmental, social and economic dimensions.

Let's examine 'sustainable' and 'development.'

The word sustainable has the dimension of time attached to its meaning – be it environmental sustainability or economic sustainability. Cambridge dictionary defines sustainability thus - causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time.

Sustainability has a sense of present, past and future embedded in it. Sustainability means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

In simple terms, if a father leaves 100 trees in an orchard to his son or daughter, in ideal situations, the son or daughter should hand over at least 100 trees to his children. Each generation preserves what has been given to them if not, create more if there is a need for it. In the scenario of 100 trees, if the children cut down a few trees or if natural calamities claim a few trees, in a truly sustainable world, they ensure to plant a few trees to correct the imbalance created. They create balance based on their understanding shared by their father.

In a community, in a country, in an organization, the onus of communicating sustainability rests with the leaders. Which means, for leaders to take the ownership and communicate, they need to be informed. Leaders of countries, private corporations, social organizations and community bodies need to be communicated to- about sustainable development.

Sustainability is the foundation for today's leading global framework for international cooperation – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Each of the 17 SDGs has clear-cut targets to be achieved by 2030. The goals and targets are universal, which means they apply to all countries, irrespective of their economic or development status. Reaching the Sustainable Development Goals requires multi-stakeholder action– from governments, businesses, civil society and people have a role to play.

Brundtland report sums up the underlying principles of sustainable development clearly and succinctly.

- Economic, social and ecological aspects and processes are intertwined and therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation. The actions of both public and private stakeholders are inter-connected and multi-dimensional.

- Sustainable development is above and beyond just environmental protection. To fulfil our material and immaterial needs, we need economic well-being and a society based on solidarity.
- The effects of today's actions on the future must be taken into account (intergenerational aspect) so that future generations can also satisfy their needs.
- Sustainable development requires long-term structural change in our economic and social system, with the aim of reducing environmental and resource consumption to a sustainable level while maintaining economic performance and social cohesion.

In 2020, Sustainable development and communication for sustainable development is in the news every day as the world copes with climate change, biodiversity loss, conflict and resource scarcity.

Snippets of recent reporting of incorrect and faulty sustainable development -

- The Independent reported in April, 2018 about hundreds of dead sharks and other fish found trapped in a 'ghost net' drifting across the Caribbean.
- The Guardian, February, 2020 - Oil and gas firms 'have had far worse climate impact than thought'. Study indicates human fossil methane emissions have been underestimated by up to 40%.
- Science Daily reported in February, 2020 a Michigan State University and University of Maryland-led study that sounds alarm bells regarding the "biodiversity crisis" or the loss of wildlife around the world.
- National Geographic reported in February, 2020 that Bumblebees are going extinct in a time of 'climate chaos'. Loss of the vital pollinators, due in part to temperature extremes and fluctuations, could have dire consequences for ecosystems and agriculture.
- According to the World Bank, the fashion industry is responsible for 10 % of annual global carbon emissions, more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined. At this pace, the fashion industry's greenhouse gas emissions will surge more than 50 % by 2030.

- World Economic Forum reported on March 5, 2020 that 6 of the world's 10 most polluted cities are in India. New Delhi has the worst air pollution of any capital city. Air pollution kills 1.25 million people in India every year.
- The Guardian reported in September, 2015 that Up to 90% of seabirds have plastic in their guts. Birds are eating 'astronomical' amount of marine debris they mistake for fish eggs, with the biggest problem areas near Australia and New Zealand
- Phys.org reported in January, 2020 that unsustainable sand mining is threatening lives along the Mekong River in Cambodia. Now new research, as part of a project led by University of Southampton, has shown sand mining is causing river beds to lower, leading to riverbank instability and increasing the likelihood of dangerous river bank collapse, damaging infrastructure and housing and putting lives at risk.

The magnitude of the problem is so huge that finding solutions to non-sustainable development and implementing it calls for holistic involvement of all stakeholders including organizations for global development like the United Nations, World Bank, governments, governmental organizations, state-run institutions, educational institutions, NGOs, regional or local community-based organizations, religious institutions and families.

What has gone wrong in communication of sustainability?

After analysing the above snippets of press coverage, it's found that the complete onus of sustainable development rests on no one. Not on governments, on private corporations or on individuals. As the ramifications of un-sustainable development are so deep and not pronounced immediately, it's challenging to draw direct correlation to the ill-effects.

There is less or no

- Ownership- on the part of all stakeholders concerned
- Lack of regulation from the governments of the world
- Clarity of action points- to be communicated down to the last person in the communication chain

- Monitoring – if corrective measures to correct imbalances in development are taken care of
- Penalizing – Punishing sustainable development offenders and adapting the legal system to account for ‘sustainability crimes’ is the need of the hour.
- Tracking achievement of sustainable development targets – by all the stakeholders as above

A few reasons for the huge imbalance in sustainable development:

- The financial institutions that invest in fossil fuel industries like oil and gas. It’s surprising that celebrities endorse such financial institutions without giving it any thought. In January, 2020, the Swedish Environmental activist Ms. Greta Thunberg slammed Tennis champion Roger Federer for endorsing Credit Suisse after it was reported that the Swiss bank has invested \$57billion in fossil fuel enterprises, which in turn harms the environment.
- The governmental regulatory bodies that turned a blind eye to sustainability and allowed private owners to reap the benefits of exploiting non-renewable natural resources. In spite of NGOs like Green Peace and Sierra Club campaigning against non-sustainable developmental activities in different countries, the governments of say, US, Canada and India have encouraged non-sustainable investments in mines, etc.
- Lack of awareness on the part of consumers – for example, a vast majority of consumers of fashion are unaware of the harm that they cause to the environment. In spite of being aware, fashion industry has not taken many concrete steps to reduce their carbon footprint.
- In general, consumers are unaware of their own unsustainable practices as it’s difficult to draw a correlation between their consumption, food habits, travel habits, construction practises to sustainability. While it’s possible to draw correlations, either it’s not getting communicated effectively or in spite of people being aware of the ill-effects of their consumption, they tend to ignore as it doesn’t affect them immediately.

Recent reports about the Corona virus unified the entire world to come together- right from the WHO to local government bodies, educational institutions, religious institutions and so on and so

forth. Communication about the Corona virus has been effectively percolated down to the last person in the ends of the world.

Unsustainable development and climate change have killed, displaced and affected hundreds of millions whereas though an epidemic like Covid-19 has only killed a few thousands, the communication systems of the world sprang into action because of the immediacy of its effects.

Strategic communication for sustainable development - Suggestions

In recent years, due to citizen activism, governments have become more active in preserving the resources for future generations. While the current regulatory and communication framework must be strengthened with more strategic communication plans, here are some pragmatic recommendations for better communication for sustainable development:

1. **Charity begins at home, communication about sustainable development must begin at home** – The sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg started protesting against the Swedish government as a result of coming to know about climate change at the age of 8. Her family supported her throughout her two years of protest which has now snowballed into a global movement – in communication for sustainable development – in encouraging the world leaders to take action – in favour of sustainable development. The onus of sustainable development is on the individual- on an individual's value system, convictions, a general regard for life and the living, respect for natural resources and the belief that everything in nature is interconnected – one's upbringing plays a big role in shaping up this belief system.
2. **Learning from indigenous communities** – Though they constitute only 5 percent of the world population, indigenous people are agents of sustainable development in terms of the environment. Interestingly, traditional indigenous territories encompass 22 percent of the world's land surface, but 80 percent of the planet's biodiversity. A third of global forests, vital for curbing gas emissions, are primarily managed by indigenous peoples, families, smallholders and local communities. Their sense of mutual respect for natural resources and for the planet in general and their methods of percolating this ethos down the generations is worth exploring in the context of an increasingly consumerist world.

3. **Communicating for sustainable development through world religions** – In today’s world, though organized religion is losing significance among the millennials and younger populations, it provides an opportunity to communicate to a captive audience. When the religious leaders call for more sustainable practices, it may lead to better buy in and more accountability. Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* appeals to "every person living on this planet" for an inclusive dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.
4. **Contribution of media and communication scholarship** as an agent of innovation in building sustainable futures – The possibilities of social media are endless if used properly. Statista reported that by 2021, 3.1 billion people will be on social media. That throws open immense opportunities for communication for sustainable development. A February 2020 study published by Brown University found out that a quarter of posts about climate change denial on Twitter were written by bots. It calls for stringent regulation for better social media communication in today’s day and age.
5. **Make the current thin line to ethics thicker** – As of today, using a single-use plastic cutlery and throwing it into a garbage bag is not considered ‘wrong doing’ by many. Burning plastic in one’s courtyard is not considered stealing -rather people who indulge in such acts consider it as an act of cleaning. Cutting down native flora and paving one’s land with concrete tiles is considered an act of beautification rather than an act of depriving future generations of resources. Using single-use material made from non-renewable fossil fuels in reality amounts to stealing- from future generations. Burning plastic and adding to carbon emissions means stealing from the future generations’ carbon credits. Same with cutting down native flora and destroying the environmental balance. There are no easy solutions in sight to bring about the connection of unsustainable practices to ‘wrong doing’ but the onus of such communication rests with the already enlightened individuals and organizations.

Conclusion

Sustainable development is vital for life and critical for the survival of future generations. Strategic communication of the consequences of un-sustainable development can bring about big changes in maintaining a balance in the environmental, economic and social areas.

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