Making Local Voices Count by Deborah J. Winsten
a prospectus on bottom up communication for effective and sustainable development

This document outlines how to empower very poor people with basic communication skills so they can contribute to development. Simple techniques engage all stakeholders in sharing information that is vital to initial assessments, project design and implementation as well as monitoring and impact evaluation.

Everybody who participates learns by doing, and demonstrates their knowledge the same way, in a dialogue that is easy to replicate and continue. Even without a common language, diverse populations can share local experience.

My observations and practices are based in facilitating community communication and hands-on journalism training in fifteen countries over more than ten years. This process can be quickly initiated with minimal training, low budgets, and few resources in terms of staff or equipment, yet it benefits any development that necessitates communication with local populations.

Why Are Local Voices Important?

Just as "one person, one vote" epitomizes representative democracy, "one person, one <u>voice</u>" is a fundamental right that underlies constructive social change. Throughout the world, those who don't believe that their voice (or their vote) counts won't participate.

People who are impacted by development may be poor and illiterate, but they are not stupid. Simple communication exercises tap the rich resources within each individual, and elicit valuable information for community outreach and development. Participatory, literacy optional training offers an intuitive and safe forum in which people contribute their knowledge and opinions.

International development funders recognize the need to involve local residents in projects. However, exigencies can render "community buy-in" a mere formality. **Making Local Voices Count** engages people from the bottom up to achieve the true goal of locally guided and sustained development.

Professionals working in resource-poor areas have seen projects fail despite NGOs' (nongovernmental organizations) best efforts and consultations with the recipient communities. In some cases, this occurs because local voices were not included in key aspects of planning and execution. Pertinent examples include wells with hand pumps that were "spoiled" by the very same young men who had constructed them. Community elders approved the location without consulting the resident youth whose local courtship rituals were disrupted by the placement. Hearing local voices and honoring their wisdom not only contributes to the health and wellbeing of the community, it is cost-effective.

Eliciting Authentic Voices

This section details how stakeholders without literacy or skills in official languages communicate with others, often for the first time. They contribute equally as listeners and speakers, unlike typical development communication that is top-down, emanating from few sources to many recipients.

The following guidelines tangibly underscore the values of transparency and inclusion:
- participants form a circle that allows each person to see and be seen
- everyone who shows up participates in the circle
- value novices, encourage all questions

- use gestures, mime, pictograms
- every speaker is heard, regardless of language(s) spoken
- speak only for and about oneself

The simple act of gathering in a circle that enables everyone to see and be seen rewards those who contribute merely by showing up. It's also a powerful message about equality. Within the large group, each participant demonstrates her/his agreement with these principles, and then practices them in activities that further build communication skills.

Use of mime, gestures and drawings ensures that everyone understands the initial interactions. These transcend dialects, aural abilities, education and age to achieve uniform understanding. Valuing the novice often means that when one person has a question or need for clarification, others do, too. It is crucial to honor the firsthand experiences expressed by a range of stakeholders, from disabled persons to local chiefs, government officials and NGO staff. **Making Local Voices Count** does not rely on literacy or a dominant language.

Drums, dance and music are freely comprehensible without reliance on dialects. Sharing voices, clapping in sequence and moving in rhythm can be potent unifying experiences. Most traditional cultures recognize a talking stick, or other way of designating that one person merits the attention of the entire group for the duration.

To further evoke a joyful exchange of skills and learning, it's critical to establish that each person speaks only for her/himself, and only about his/her own experience. Although this may be unfamiliar in hierarchical cultures, identifying one's own knowledge and opinions as separate from inherited ideas is key. Setting these parameters maximizes the peer process, which is often the first time participants speak directly with each other.

Another hallmark of participatory communication dictates that people use their most comfortable language to present themselves. Speaking in local dialects (as opposed to an official language) may seem to exclude some people, but this practice encourages authentic participation, and shows that all voices really do count.

To telegraph each person's level of understanding, we use simple, agreed upon gestures that everyone in the circle can see. For example, an extended fist with "thumbs-up" is an intuitive and enthusiastic "yes" in most of the world. Similarly, the extended fist with thumb horizontal indicates uncertainty.

Working together, drawing in the dirt with sticks or using whatever is available, the facilitator and participants devise pictograms to illustrate the agenda. Since virtually all groups include persons who provide rudimentary translations, comprehension is achieved as a flexible and familiar "vocabulary" of simple visuals that incorporate local wisdom is created.

Telling True Stories

After establishing the premises for egalitarian communication, participants tell true stories in their own voices. The primary story for each person is her/his own biography. This introductory exercise uses the pictograms that the group devised as a format for a simple interview. The large (or small) group divides into pairs using a transparent method that affirms participants' basic knowledge. Everyone can count to two, so people alternate speaking those numbers around the circle. Therefore, everyone can see who will be introducing whom. The pairs take a few minutes to get acquainted, then the partners present each other to the assembled group. Even among peers, this is a new experience.

Other icebreaker exercises help participants get in touch with their own wisdom and creativity. For example, everyone has a vision of prosperity that contrasts with his/her present situation. These can be expressed verbally or through drawings and skits. The community communication

process includes each individual, regardless of her/his skills or primary language. Therefore, there are no barriers, and all stakeholders can participate equally.

Tools for Talking and Listening to Each Other

Universally familiar items, like cassettes or microphones, can facilitate hearing and interaction for development communication. They not only enable participants to speak and listen to each other, but they also make being heard concrete. This portion of the process is intuitive and easy to replicate, building skills among novices as well as more experienced participants.

An incontrovertible truth is that hearing one's own voice via recording for the first time is surprising. Expressing one's own truth is another revelation, especially when using appropriate technology. Production tools are not as ubiquitous as radio receivers, but small handheld cassette recorders (often with FM radios) are widely available and many people know how to use them.

Everyone I've ever met in working and traveling many countries has recognized the power of a microphone. Despite lack of firsthand experience, people instantly identify it as a tool that conveys information. Using a microphone confers significance on the speaker, and offers a memorable experience to someone who suddenly merits others' attention merely by holding the mic.

Our first forays often use microphone surrogates, such as talking sticks, or mere hand gestures. However, recording devices are integral to the process because each person learns by recording others, then listening together. This basic ability to use media empowers individuals, regardless of whether we employ the common Walkman type cassette recorder, or a more versatile and sophisticated solid-state recorder/mp3 player.

To acquaint participants with this equipment, I have designed brief trainings that work for people without sight, formal education or access to electricity. The step by step instructions I offer enable them to train others successfully. The simplest iteration of recording includes immediate playback for the groups because the act of listening together is a powerful bond. If necessary, this can be accomplished with the small built in speakers or headphones. The procedures are exceptionally versatile and the supplies can be very budget friendly.

Other useful methods of sharing recorded voices and stimulating community engagement may use a simple megaphone, or a public address system with speakers and an amplifier. Sometimes, boomboxes are available. In fact, resourceful people all over the world have devised ways to listen to themselves and each other. This occurs haphazardly or on a small scale in countries where speech is strictly regulated, or equipment scarce. It demonstrates that the need to communicate overcomes many barriers, and highlights the fundamental human right to freedom of expression and information.

In other projects, low power FM broadcast is indispensable. Solar powered laptop computers add to an impressive array of reasonably affordable options that participants and their communities can utilize. This is merely a sampling of what is possible and has been proven sustainable. With some practice, local people discover their own solutions, and determine which technologies, equipment and locations are most appropriate for them.

These technical tools augment our efforts to present authentic knowledge in new ways. Repeating the introduction techniques (described above in **Eliciting Authentic Voices**) with recordings is infectiously fun and simple, if not elegant.

Literacy is Optional; Participation is Key

The basis for **Making Local Voices Count** is PRA (Participatory Rapid Analysis). This approach is widely known among development professionals. However, many development

communicators employ the slightly more complex Behavior Change Communications (BCC) and similar disciplines to define objectives through templates that pinpoint knowledge, behavior and action. By incorporating physical activity with self-expression, **Making Local Voices Count** yields information that participants can directly absorb and act on. The visible vocabulary of pictograms reminds participants of their basic agreements as well as the topic(s) they've chosen to focus on. Their input is available immediately, and it can be easily summarized or revisited using the literacy optional symbols.

Because these communication techniques are so accessible, people who have never held a pencil, and neither read nor write, are emboldened to continue the dialog with others in their lives. These potent tools are versatile and easily adapted once people are familiar with them. They also enhance learning, and are often stepping stones that indicate readiness for formal education, especially with women and youth.

The premise that information is everywhere means that each person possesses the ability to access and share it with all members of the community. One primary exercise is to draw the sequence of a typical day for a child, woman or man in the community. Another exercise challenges small groups or individuals to map their immediate environment, identifying locations they deem significant. The sophistication of insight and detail affirms that people know much more than they normally assume. Conducting walking narratives through areas that people have mapped enables them to observe interactions that might have escaped notice otherwise. As participants work together to define topics for discussion and presentation to each other, these tools can be employed to depict pertinent history and background. Making social interactions visual illustrates truths about communities and their residents. Using simple drawings that show the location of local natural resources, like water, trees and arable land, brings many other relationships to light.

Another hallmark is that the trainings occur when and where the participants determine. They use the PRA exercises to detail their daily routines, and choose to make the gatherings and techniques part of their everyday life. **Making Local Voices Count** quickly becomes as intuitive and indispensable as the creativity, skills and aptitudes that emerge.

Fundamentals of Outreach

Participants continue to embrace novices and gain skills as they use these tools more widely. They maximize the benefits of talking and listening with others, including disenfranchised and marginalized people, women and girls, minority ethnic groups, the disabled. Person to person contact underscores that everyone, not only the most respected persons in our cultural or political hierarchy, has insight to share.

As people tend to investigate what they value, participants learn which languages their respondents speak and understand; they determine who has numeracy, reading and writing skills. Likewise, people volunteer information that is important to them and frequently share general concerns about crime, health, livelihoods and politics. Participants and respondents may devise pictograms to represent these topics and make the information sharing process easy.

Using the Tools for Surveys and Reports

The very people who have mapped out their communities are engaging others in similar assessments. Before embarking on a survey, for example, they determine measurable goals that can be communicated visually. In many cases, such as a proposed development initiative, the primary outcome is disseminating information and keeping track of who was included in the distribution. These surveys use the same visible vocabulary to immediately track results. They

are scalable to accommodate local needs and terrain. Large training groups divide into small teams to perform the survey. The small teams present the preliminary results to their respondents, and then reproduce (or document) the literacy-free instruments for the subsequent reports back to the larger groups and the community.

Reporting back reinforces information and increases the likelihood that people will take constructive action based on what they know or have heard. Frequently, respondents are enthusiastic about the process and want to become involved or organize others to participate in the survey.

Another intuitive survey that provides useful data and insight queries individuals' access to information. Through this activity, people codify what they probably already know, like who has the ability to listen to radio. Working together to design the survey, participants uncover nuances in their own understanding. For instance, they discover that household ownership of a radio receiver does not always confer listening privileges on all family members.

This type of "insider info" gives all people an accurate reflection of their own circumstances, summarized by pictograms and simple charts. And that is the most salient value: the role of participatory, literacy optional communication is to reflect reality so that everyone can understand and contribute. Participants are not merely collecting data for outsiders; they are using new tools to make their own knowledge tangible. These outreach surveys are the essence of transparency.

Focus Groups and Target Audiences

Although **Making Local Voices Count** is universally effective, development often targets specific segments within a community. Similarly, participants who have conducted surveys and synthesized inputs from respondents may want to focus on a particular population segment, for example, girl children or farmers. Their experience of field surveys is lively, so their reports may contain assorted extraneous details. This is an opportunity to broach (or reiterate) the concept of target audiences, another key understanding for effective communication.

To make this concept clear, participants create a demographic profile of their group using simple gestures and symbols to identify the various population segments. They then see how they align with their survey respondents. These simple designations highlight local cultures and vividly show that people can learn from each other.

The small groups reporting back to their original larger cohort have, in many cases, identified people that function as focus groups. The information gatherers naturally want to share their findings in order to affirm their data. While this may not represent a scientific sampling, it is an honest and effective effort to triangulate what they've learned.

A likely forum for sharing the findings is a community-wide meeting where attendees can comment on the surveyors' presentations. An ideal agenda includes time and space for breakout groups after the initial presentations. Generally, the meeting divides into three groups of familiars: youth, women and elders. They separate to discuss the main topics and practice using participatory tools, if they wish. These breakout groups appoint a reporter and a recorder, who may draw in the dirt (or use whatever is available) to show that ideas expressed there have been noted. When the community meeting resumes, the breakout or peer focus groups report back and everyone contributes to the discussion.

Because the entire process is transparent, verifiable and open to all, there is little opportunity for conflicts or misunderstandings to occur. These exchanges are especially valuable because everyone is included in the communication process. The simple methods respond to local needs and priorities while maximizing the community's strengths. **Making Local Voices Count** builds durable local capacity for surveys that involve all stakeholders in meaningful project feedback and

evaluation.

Conclusion

Engaging local residents is necessary for international development to be sustainable; eliminating barriers to sharing information is cost-effective. **Making Local Voices Count** offers basic tools that give intended beneficiaries a voice and involve everyone in development communication. These techniques have been field tested in Africa and Asia with diverse populations across periurban regions as well as rural and post conflict areas.