

# DEVCOM LOS BAÑOS STYLE

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Development communication as a concept was first articulated on December 10, 1971 [40 years ago, almost to the day] at a University of the Philippines College of Agriculture symposium in Los Baños in honor of Dr. Dioscoro L. Umali. The theme of the symposium was “In Search of Breakthroughs in Agricultural Development,” and development communication was presented as a social science breakthrough that was also a carrier of other breakthroughs. It was described as interventionistic, planned, and using multiple channels including the unmediated word. Its link to nonformal education was noted.

That first DevCom paper was entitled “Development Communication in the Agricultural Context.” It was picked up the following year by a Philippine journal, *Solidarity*, and published as “Development Communication.” The *International Development Review* reprinted it in its 1973/72 issue as “What Do We Mean By Development Communication?”

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the 1950s and 60s, communication was a pristine field energized by the new electronic media. It was first put to use as propaganda, advertising, public relations and other types of persuasive communication.

Agricultural extension saw its educational possibilities but only as a mediated channel for its mass messages. At about the same time, social scientists had started to analyze its properties as a communicative process. By the 70s, media was still mass media, information was news, and professional communicators were journalists, broadcasters or PR persons. Development was not considered a news beat. It remained the stamping ground of social scientists and UN organizations.

In press circles development communication was viewed with great suspicion as “government communication” which, in a freewheeling libertarian press, meant “government say-so.”

Through the late 70s and the 80s, development communication continued to be presented as practice and as an academic field in forums provided mainly by Jose D. Drilon and the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA), by Juan L. Mercado and the Philippine Press Institute, by Alan Chalkley, Amitabha Chowdhury and the Asian Press Institute, by the Asian Media Information and Communication Center (AMIC), the

World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), and the Philippine Association of Communication Educators (PACE).

In these forums development communication was acknowledged to have owed its beginnings to agricultural journalism; to development support communication, then considered a must in UN development projects; and to development journalism with its focus on economics rather than on politics. The bellwether of the latter was Depthnews, whose first three letters stood for development, economics and population.

By the late 1990s, development communication was no longer suspect in Asia as being a “lapdog of government.” Development had become a respectable news beat.

In Los Baños it had become the core of the first and only four-tiered academic program in development communication in the Philippines and in the world, and the DevCom faculty in Los Baños had received official blessings to form what was then the youngest college of UPLB. Today there is a development communication unit at the World Bank and elsewhere, and there are communication for development curricula not only in Asia where they first manifested but also in Latin America, Africa and even in some developed countries. In the world of practice, the DevCom equivalent is C4D or ICT4D.

## THE LOS BAÑOS TRADEMARK

Where before the Los Baños DevCom program stood alone, many similar programs now exist, some acknowledging descent from it and some not. As far back as the 70s when development communication had become visible enough to invite strong support or equally strong criticism, different working versions of it had surfaced as well.

To mark off the university discipline and practice that had originated in Los Baños, we began referring to it as DevCom, Los Baños style, not so much to patent the concept as to describe how it was seen from our particular window.

And how was development communication viewed in a university that had started out as an agricultural college – along with a college of forestry – where the livelihood and welfare of poor farm families were the chief concern?

In 1971 it had been defined rather lengthily as “the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfillment of the human potential.”

## **SIX MAJOR TRAITS DISTINGUISHED THE LOS BAÑOS DEVCOM TRADEMARK:**

1. It referred to the human interchange of information, not to the mechanical media, least of all the mass media that were the favored channels of communication then.
2. It was seen as a confluence of the development process and the communication process, thus changing its character and therefore its definition as each of the two components was altered by ever-evolving knowledge and experience.
3. Its end users were the poor and the disadvantaged in a developing society – the small farmers and fishermen, the landless laborers, the women and children – most of whom lived in the countryside.
4. It was planned change for the better that started with the basics like enough food and income, renewable natural resources, social equality, and the predisposing values to normative change.
5. Its unit of study and analysis was more often the community rather than the individual.
6. It was nonformal education mainly for out-of-school learners.

## PROGRESSION OF DEVCOM THOUGHT

By the turn of the century, the Los Baños definition of development communication had been sharpened to “the art and science of human communication linked to a society’s planned transformation from a state of poverty to one of dynamic socio-economic growth that makes for greater equity and the larger unfolding of individual potential.”

Well into the new millennium, the six basics of DevCom still hold, with some provisos and caveats. It is change for the better, surely, but is best defined by the concerned community with guiding inputs from external sources when needed. It remains centered on the poor and the marginalized in a developing society, ideally tracking them through their migratory movements as they search for a better life. It is clearly nonformal education whose aim is to hone people’s capabilities to access relevant information and make personal and group decisions based on rational analysis.

Four decades after the Los Baños DevCom was first presented, global statistics say that extreme poverty has declined overall but persists in the rural areas, especially among the fisher folks in the case of the Philippines. Economic conditions have improved – in some developing countries more than in others – although the changes are mainly seen in urban places. The record remains spotty for equity, participatory governance, freedom of choice, the right to

dissent and other fundamental human rights, however. Inequitable social structures still prevail in Asia, Africa and elsewhere.

## **NEW TECHNOLOGY**

How DevCom is viewed and practiced continues to change with added knowledge and insights related to the process of development and of communication.

A major shift that is communication-related is the marriage of the technology of information and of communication which has revolutionized how information is exchanged even in developing societies. It has effectively conquered physical distance, thus blurring the lines between rural and urban as well as between political boundaries. Yet it allows intimate conversations between two or among many, can simulate face-to-face interaction with its simultaneous visual and aural capabilities and can create and maintain a communication network accessible to participants at all hours of the day.

Digital technology has contributed to the actual and virtual mobility of rural people not only by expanding their reach but also by allowing them to sojourn in other than in their birth communities while keeping in continuous touch with families. Rural dwellers now find themselves better able to keep up with and participate in national, regional and even global affairs if they choose to.

Digital technology has become pocket-sized, portable, personal and affordable. It has changed the nature of mediated communication, especially among young people in urban places.

On the one hand, it has made their direct participation in governance possible exemplified by their sparking of the relatively peaceful revolutions in this new century. Yet one gets the feeling that in some societies digital technology has served as blinders for them, limiting their vision only to what is here and now. Other of its possible uses by young adults for the development of the poor and the deprived await further study and practice.

## **NEW CONTENT**

In this new century, context has acquired larger importance for development communicators as they strive to keep relevant in their work. Certainly the kinds of information they must now deal with have become more varied, taking into account political and cultural problems among others. They need to reassess the expanded environment for DevCom and not rely solely on old wisdoms. In doing so they would do well to remember that while information and communication technology has helped to redefine that environment, the new, web-based media are the latest communication tools, but are only tools nevertheless. ICT may prove helpful to development communicators if properly used, but to rely on it solely might cut them



off from their proper clientele. To remain true to the latter, they may need to review their professional goals and then decide on what to communicate with whom, using face-to-face methods or whatever medium is appropriate, be it “traditional”, “new”, “digital”, “social” or whatever.

While still salient, livelihood information may no longer suffice to serve the poor and disadvantaged in this new millennium. The door looks to have opened wider for information on political, cultural, and global development as well. In today’s enlarged but connected and fast-changing environment, the science and technology aspect of DevCom assumes greater utility for the development communicator. So much so that if I were asked what development communication is at this time, I would probably say that it is the science of human communication linked to the transitioning of communities from poverty in all its form to a dynamic, overall growth that fosters equity and the unfolding of human potential.

## CONCLUSION

I close with some lines from the foreword of a 1980s book that sought to distill the Los Baños DevCom experience at that point and that now seems prophetic:

*“The concept [development communication] has not been static. Sometimes it is praised or criticized on grounds no longer germane – if they ever were. In the ‘90s and through the century just around the corner, it will probably continue to adapt as any dynamic organism will. Once it congeals as unsupported dogma is when it is likely to die off. It will keep vigorous so long as it is anchored on thoughtful practice and methodical inquiry.”*

*“Development communication has gone by some other tag in the past and may be called differently in the future. Its present name could go out of fashion after a while. Not likely to disappear, though, is the idea that underlies it: that the art of [human] communication, infused by social science principles, can be consciously directed towards improving people’s lives. This is the essence of development communication, regardless of how it is labeled or what else may be imputed to it.”*

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