

Planned communication at programme level



Table of Contents

Communication at programme level	3
Introduction	
Background: Topola Rural Development Programme	
Findings	4
TRDP and communication	
Conclusions	
Analysis	10
Different communication axes	
What does the Programme want to achieve by communicating with the community?	
What are the channels of communication with the community and how do they work?	
Sida's role in the communication	
Conclusions & Recommendations	16

The author would like to thank the staff at Sida, at TRDP and the residents of Topola who gave their time and shared their thoughts throughout this research.

November 2004

Ulla Engberg
ulla@engberg.fsnet.co.uk

Published by Sida 2004

Information Department

Author: Ulla Engberg

Printed by Edita Sverige AB, 2004

Art. no.: SIDA4333en

This publication can be downloaded/ordered from www.sida.se/publications

Planned communication at programme level

Introduction

There is a growing interest in how communication can help achieve development goals and make development projects better and more efficient. In theory, communication is “a tool to create participation, to achieve objectives and to contribute to dialogue and good quality”.¹ Yet, there are still many lessons to be learnt about how to go about it in reality.

The aim of this report is to focus on the experiences of one Sida-financed development programme, in order to try to reach more general conclusions and recommendations that could be useful for the organisation's continued work in this field.

The report is based on a seven-week field study, conducted within the framework of a masters-programme in Communication for Development at Malmö University. The findings are a result of a broad range of interviews with Sida and project staff as well as local stakeholders in Topola, Serbia. The interviews were combined with field visits and participatory observation of Programme activities.

Background: Topola Rural Development Programme

The overall objective of the Topola Rural Development Programme (TRDP) is to “improve the quality of life for the communities living in the municipality”.² In order to achieve this, the Programme facilitates the forming and implementation of projects “responding to the initiatives and active participation of the stakeholders, ie individuals, groups, companies, public institutions and the local government of Topola”.³

The work is carried out by three sub-sections or “facilities”.

The Community facility focuses on civil society development, while the Municipal facility concentrates on reform of the local authorities and the Economic Facility on the development of agriculture as well as the business-sector. Each Facility is headed by a Facilitator, whose work is overseen by the Programme Manager.

According to the Programme's terms of reference, if the project is successful, Sida envisions it as a pilot-programme for similar activities elsewhere in Serbia.

Topola Municipality	
Inhabitants:	27,000
Location:	80 km south of Belgrade in Serbia
Mun. budget (2003):	app 17 million SEK
Main employment:	Agriculture & Tourism
TRDP – basic facts	
Financed by:	Sida
Implemented by:	Opto International
From/to:	March 2002–Feb 2005
Total budget:	45,3 million SEK

¹ Communications Policy – Sida's work with communication, 2002.

² Rural Development in the Municipality of Topola, Serbia: Terms of References for a project development and implementation consultant, January 2002

³ TRDP Inception Report, Opto International, June 2002

Findings

TRDP and communication

Context

When interviewed about the Programme's communication, many in TRDP and in the local community volunteered, by way of "introduction", to explain the context into which the Programme came.

These "introductions" all gravitated towards four areas/factors:

- *People were not used to take initiatives.* People in Topola had been living for over 50 years in a system where virtually all initiatives came from above. Typically, a party official would come to town and ask the people what they wanted or needed. The community would then come up with a long list, from which the party official would select one or two wishes, which would be fulfilled. Thus, when the TRDP arrived, it followed in the footsteps of other outsiders who had come to hand out "gifts", in what seemed an arbitrary fashion.
- *People were used to credits.* In Yugoslavia it was common to receive credits for private needs: to buy a car, to build a house, etc. Credits were also given to businesses, but there was no requirement for a business plan. The conditions of the credits were very favourable and, for long periods, inflation was so high that the credit virtually became a donation. Therefore, when people heard about an organisation arriving to improve their quality of life, the first thing they thought of was credits.
- *People felt they had a right to receive help.* When Milosevic was toppled in October 2000, many Serbs were relieved. They felt they had been victims of their former president, of war and of sanctions. Now, finally, their suffering would be over and the path to a better life was ahead. There was a widespread assumption that the outside world would help them catch up, almost as if it was "owed" to them after all they had been through.
- *People were suspicious of foreign NGOs.* Due to decades of propaganda, people were suspicious of foreign actors and of the NGO-sector. "Non-governmental" was interpreted as "anti-governmental" and subsequently understood as "traitors" and "spies". This fitted well with the fact that most NGOs at the time was financed mainly by foreign money. A study commissioned by TRDP in the summer of 2002 confirmed this perception, as many said they thought the Programme

was “manipulating people” (ie the stated goals of the Programme were other than the real goals).⁴

All these factors shaped people’s expectations of and attitudes towards the Programme when it arrived in the spring of 2002. A fifth factor, related to the specific situation in Topola, was also significant for the communication between the Programme and the local community.

- *Limited local media.* Topola lies in a media shadow. Apart from one commercial radio station, which mainly plays folk music, there is no local media. Regional and national printing and broadcasting media do not report from Topola on a regular basis.

Communication in the Beginning

TRDP did not have a communication strategy from the beginning. After a three-month inception period, it received funding for a special “Information and Programme Awareness Project”, described below.

However, it is important to note that, in the eyes of the local community, the communication with and about the Programme started even before the TRDP had set up office in Topola.

Some rumours started already when a consultant arrived in the spring of 2001 to research the basis for a rural development programme. In the proposal document she estimated that a budget of 70 million SEK would be suitable for a three-year programme in Topola.⁵ This figure later reoccurred in the terms of reference of the Programme in January 2002. According to an assessment paper at that time, this was a “tentative budget” and “it has been stressed during the discussions with the Topola representatives, as well as with the Consultant, that those figures were tentatively indicative and do not have face value.”⁶

The “Topola representatives” were the Mayor and the Head of the Municipal Council, who came to Stockholm in January 2002 for the interviews with those bidding for the contract. When they returned to Topola, they called a press conference to announce the good news to the community.

What was said at this press conference and in a live radio show has been confirmed by several independent interviews, among others with journalists present at the time. All tell the story of how the politicians boasted about a Swedish organisation coming to invest 15 million DM (the equivalent of 70 million SEK) in Topola. Nothing was said about the conditions attached to this money or that salaries, rent and implementation costs were included in the sum.

Word got around and soon everybody in Topola knew that “the Swedes” were coming with a lot of money. According to the Programme implementers, when the TRDP arrived, the attitude from the local politicians was more or less “where is our money?”. In an interview for this research, the Head of the Municipal Council confirmed that it took some time before they understood what the Programme was about.

According to the Programme implementers, the attitude from the local politicians was more or less “where is our money?”

⁴ Public opinion of Topola Population on the project “Topola na potezu”, study by the Sociology Department of University of Belgrade, summer 2002, as part of the TRDP Baseline.

⁵ Proposal for a Local Area Development Project in FRY, Stockholm Group for Development Studies, Stockholm, June 2001

⁶ Rural Development in the municipality of Topola, Sida Bedömnings-PM, diarienummer 2001-03266, January 2002

The figure of 15 million DM was repeated many times, not only by the politicians, but also by the TRDP. A week or so after having arrived in town, a public meeting/press conference was held in the local cinema. It was a big event that attracted a lot of interest, with a guest list including the Swedish Ambassador to Belgrade and the Serbian Prince and Princess Karadjordjevic.

There are differing accounts as to what exactly was said at the meeting, but it is clear that most people came away from there with their initial impressions about funding confirmed. As one interviewee put it: “People thought that they would wake up every morning, look themselves in the mirror before turning on the tap of running water and thank God for the Swedes!”⁷

If it took the politicians some time to understand what the Programme was about, it took even longer before the people of Topola understood it. More or less from Day One, the TRDP offices were under siege from people who had come to ask for “their” share of the money. Up to 50 people a day were queuing up outside the office. With very few exceptions, they all wanted credits. Credits to buy a cow, credits to buy machines for their business, credits to build a Swedish-Serb cultural village.

Since the TRDP was designed to “respond to the initiatives” of the locals, closing the doors to these visitors was never seen as an option. Even attempts to regulate opening hours for visitors were abandoned, as impossible to stick to. People would stop staff in any event, whether in the corridors of their office, in the streets, in the shops, etcetera.

Therefore, the facilitators sat down with each individual and listened to their story; trying to explain what it meant to be a development programme and what kind of initiatives the Programme could support, while simultaneously trying to see if there were any potential projects or initiatives to encourage and build on. In the evenings they would go to the villages, to local companies and interest groups, to schools and other public sector workplaces, in order to present themselves and the Programme, to counter some of the rumours and to encourage people to form initiatives that the TRDP could support.

Looking back, the TRDP staff that worked in the beginning of the Programme sees a need for more training and support in order to deal with the enormous number of inquiries. At times, they felt like psychologists, listening to people’s life stories of hardship and toil.

In addition, both staff and management bring up the need for clearer direction from Sida as to how to interpret the Sida “pillars” in reality. They felt unsure about the constraints on what they could and could not support, which made it more difficult to be straight in their own communication with people in the community. This lack of clarity was reflected in an interview with one of those who visited the TRDP office in the beginning to ask for credits. “When I left their offices, I was confused,” he says. “I had understood only two things. One was that they did not give credits, the other was that they did not really know what they could support.”

“People thought that they would wake up every morning, look themselves in the mirror before turning on the tap of running water and thank God for the Swedes!”

Since the TRDP was designed to “respond to the initiatives” of the locals, closing the doors to these visitors was never seen as an option.

⁷ The lack of a well-functioning water system is a major problem in Topola, and the one that was identified as the most important problem in the Infrastructure Master Plan, a community consultation exercise carried out under the auspices of the TRDP

Information and Programme Awareness

At the end of the inception period, three months into the Programme, there were still lines of people outside the TRDP offices. As a matter of urgency, an “Information and Programme Awareness Project” was designed, in order to try to counter some of the misunderstandings and to get on top of the communication with the community. The main components of this project were:

- Recruitment of a local *PR-assistant*.
- An *Information Centre* set up jointly with the Municipality in order to “improve the external and internal flow of information in the Municipality”⁸. Three municipal employees plus the TRDP PR-assistant would work at the Centre.
- *Advertisement* in regional radio stations as well as press coverage in the national media explaining the concept and the goal of the Programme.
- A *leaflet* about the Programme delivered to all households.
- 32 *noticeboards* placed at strategic points in the villages and around Topola. The noticeboards were divided into three sections: one for the public, one for the Municipality (to communicate with the public) and one for TRDP. The Programme used its section to advertise things coming up as well as achievements made. It was updated twice per month (later once per month).
- A 20-page *monthly magazine*, made by the Information Centre and distributed for free via kiosks and shops in Topola and the surrounding villages.

With the help of the PR-assistant, the Programme managed to raise its profile in the media. He also co-ordinated the information that went on the noticeboards and was the driving force in the Information Centre.

However, as time went by, it became increasingly clear that the Information Centre did not work as the Programme had hoped. The Municipality blamed the lack of skilled staff, while the TRDP saw the lack of interest from the Municipality in communicating with its citizens as the main problem.

Either way, it is obvious that the Municipal Staff did not feel they had the support they needed from their political bosses to carry out their new job, on top of their old duties. “I want him [the Head of the Municipal council] to look me in the eye and say what we can and cannot write,” said one of them about the work with the monthly magazine. Expressing a fear shared by his colleagues, he noted: “I will not write something that will make me loose my job.”

These tensions soon proved to be too much for the monthly magazine which closed down after four issues. The emergence of a new law, forbidding municipalities to run newspapers, radio or TV stations, was only the final nail in the coffin for an already troubled magazine.

Nor did the Information Centre take off in terms of being a place for people to find out more about the Programme. Visitors were not satisfied with the information they received at the Centre and still wanted to speak to the facilitators or to the Programme Manager.

Visitors were not satisfied with the information they received at the Centre and still wanted to speak to the facilitators or to the Programme Manager.

⁸ TRDP Progress Report June–November 2002

By the end of Phase 1 of the Programme⁹, the Information Centre existed in name only. TRDP decided to withdraw its PR-assistant from the Centre, to work solely for the Programme. His new role was based more around logistical support to various presentations and seminars.

The noticeboards have lived on but the TRDP has been almost alone in using them. The Municipality never used them due to a lack of interest or resources (depending on who you ask). The public use them to a limited degree, mainly as a way of announcing the death of a relative.

Conclusions

It is worth emphasising that the difficulties the Programme had in the beginning were very real. The Programme Manager even talks about a “lost year” and the staff that were there from the start respond with a smile and a shake of the head when asked if they would be prepared to do it again.

It is of course *positive* that so many found their way to the Programme – it would have been worse if no-one turned up. But when people in the community are interviewed 2,5 years after the TRDP came to town, many say that they only recently started understanding what the Programme is about – “and now they are leaving”.

The difficulties in the beginning were partly due to a lack of understanding of the role of communication.

It is clear that the difficulties in the beginning of the Programme were due to a combination of the context that the Programme entered, and a lack of understanding in both Sida and TRDP of the role of communication when starting a programme like this. This was also noted by the Quality Group which was established by Sida to monitor and follow-up the Programme performance.¹⁰

Limitations of the PR-approach

No doubt, there is a real challenge in explaining a concept of development, including capacity building and strengthening of democratic structures and processes, to a community that is expecting donations and credits. It is not surprising, therefore, that the TRDP in the beginning was often compared unfavourably to a USAID funded programme in the area, which was involved in more straightforward funding of projects. They would be seen to be “doing something”, while the TRDP was just “talking” and “giving training”.

However, it is essential to realise that, in this context, there are limits to how much PR and information can achieve. People need more than information in order to believe and perhaps understand what they hear. No matter how much information a person receives, it may not lead to any change, unless the context and conditions for that change are understood and taken into account.

The document Sida at Work¹¹ notes that information is sufficient or even preferred in situations where a well-defined message is being sent out to certain target groups. But when we want “to build and maintain good relationships with key stakeholders”, the document states, “communication – or dialogue – is normally required”.

⁹ Phase 1 lasted for 18 months, as did Phase 2, the last phase.

¹⁰ “Against this background [the unrealistic expectations of the citizens of Topola] Sida and the implementation consultant has made a strategic mistake in initiating programme planning and the inception phase, without first carrying out a public information campaign in Topola about the scope of the Programme and the financial resources at disposal.” Topola Rural Development Programme – First Report by the Quality Group, Stockholm Groups for Development Studies, June 2002

¹¹ Sida at Work – Sida’s Guidelines for Planned Communication, September 2003

In the TRDP there was a lack of analysis of both the Programme's communication needs and the conditions in which this communication took place. By mistaking the need for communication with the need for PR and information, the effort to address the communication problems (meaning the "Information and Programme Awareness Project") was almost exclusively focused on information going one-way, from the sender to the receiver. Also, the receiver was not very well defined. It was Topola citizens in general: thus, the same message was sent to all.

The difficulties in the beginning were partly due to a lack of understanding of the role of communication.

Indirect problems

The lack of analysis also led to other problems, which wasted Programme time and resources. For example, there seems to have been a confusion between the communication and information need of the Programme and that of the Municipality. Whereas the TRDP has information and communication needs related to its implementation (how to get past misunderstandings, how to gain trust, how to achieve lasting results), the communication needs of the Municipality touch instead on issues of democratisation, which can be seen as one of the Programme's objectives. A further complicating factor came with the fact that the politicians in the Municipality did not necessarily see increased communication with the community as a need.

Another example is the magazine, where a lot of energy and time was invested. It was an ambitious product, with 20 pages full of information about not only the TRDP, but also activities in the NGO-sector, the Municipality and Topola in general. But if the Programme really wanted to start or support a magazine that would fill the media void in Topola, it would have needed a much more long-term strategy and a more thought-through set-up of the editorial staff.

If, however, the Programme wanted a format for getting out information that people could take home to read in peace and quiet, a more focused newsletter would probably have been a better investment of resources.

Case for a systematic approach

Despite the lack of analysis of the communication needs, a lot was actually done as part of the regular programme activities. To the credit of the TRDP, the "Information and Programme Awareness Project" only represents a part of the communication efforts made by the Programme. These efforts, however, often came as instinctive responses to the situation, and as a result of a problem-solving attitude of the staff. It was not necessarily the most efficient way to deal with things, leaving the Programme in a reactive rather than proactive position.

While flexibility is always important, a more systematic approach to communication both from Sida and from the TRDP would have allowed the Programme to focus and structure its efforts better. A strategy thought through in the very beginning would have made it easier for staff to cope and would have brought more people in the community on board at an earlier stage.

People need more than information in order to believe and perhaps understand what they hear.

Analysis

This section is an attempt to structure and map the Programme's communication with the community, based on the lessons learnt within the TRDP and on interviews with people in the community.

Different communication axes

As the experience with the Topola Information Centre shows, there are different “axes” of communication, depending on who is involved at either end; and it is essential not to mix them up if you want to communicate efficiently.

Broadly, the axes could be divided into the ones in the box to the left. The first three could be said to relate to the Programme *implementation*, whereas the last three could be said to be part of the Programme *objectives*. In the first instance communication is a *tool*, in the latter it is more of an end in itself.

The axes related to objectives are important for the Programme as a whole. For example, when the Programme facilitated the creation of a form for NGO's applying for financial support from the local government, it helped establish a channel of communication between the two. By creating links *between* people in the community, suspicion could be decreased and people were encouraged to become actors and less dependant on the Programme.

The same is true when people in Topola go to training or fairs outside the Municipality or the country, making their own contacts and communication links. And when groups in Topola are now confident enough to approach other donors it is, in part, thanks to the TRDP-programme.

This research focuses, however, on the implementation side of communication and in particular the communication between the Programme and the local community, which is where the success of TRDP ultimately will be measured.

Communication axes

Programme – Community
Programme – Municipality
Programme – Sida
—
Municipality – Community
Community – Community
Community – The World

What does the Programme want to achieve by communicating with the community?

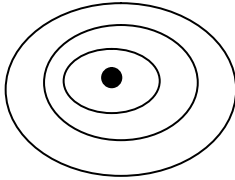
When creating a communication strategy, it is important to think through what you want to achieve with your communication. Below is a list of possible aims and objectives of TRDP's communication with the community. The list largely consists of issues that the Programme is addressing, but it has not necessarily thought of this as communication.

With its communication, the Programme wants to achieve:

- *Local understanding of the development approach*

In particular, managing expectations and explaining that there are no credits. As an example: making people realise that the Programme will not build a factory, but is ready to support the processes that might lead to a factory.

- *Increased local participation and local initiatives*



This means working with target groups on different “levels” or “circles”. An inner circle represents those key individuals in the community who are/could be driving forces for change. A circle outside them are those who are curious and interested and who could be prepared to support the “key individuals”. The “circles” are not fixed, and people as well as information move between them. It is vital for the Programme to identify the key individuals to work with. At the same time it is necessary to communicate with all “circles”, but crucially in different ways with different groups. The most “outer” circle is the community as a whole. This circle must be addressed as well, since the Programme needs a broad support for what it is trying to do, in order to make it possible for more and more people to move towards the “inner” circles, but also to achieve long-lasting results. It may be helpful to think of the “circles” or “rings” in terms of the expression “spreading like rings on the water”.

- *Openness – both in terms of accessibility and transparency*

By being accessible, the Programme opens itself up to ideas and feedback from the community, which it then can build on. This kind of responsiveness helps the Programme to get things right – and to find out when they go wrong. Being transparent, in results and methodology, can be a pedagogical tool to explain the Programme and show that it achieves results; but it is also a way to be accountable to the community, encouraging a sense of local ownership.

- *Knowledge acquisition & Sounding board*

A way to keep the Programme up-to-date about what is going on in the community and to reconfirm that it is on the right track. Here, communication with stakeholders outside the local community is also relevant and perhaps this is a “circle” outside the ones mentioned above. For example, the TRDP created a National Reference Group and used it as a sounding board/support group.

- *Life after the Programme*

By creating a dialogue about the Programme’s phase-out strategy while still in the implementing stages and by encouraging the community’s independence from the Programme, the effects of the Programme will last longer.

What are the channels of communication with the community and how do they work?

In order to find out how the communication between programme and community works, many interviews with staff and local community focused on the channels of communication. How did the people in Topola find out about the Programme, where did they get their information from and which information did they trust? Did they feel they could approach the Programme and, if so, which way did they do that?

The answers to these questions give important clues that could be the basis of a communication strategy for a programme like TRDP.

Channels of communication between TRDP and Topola community

- *Talk of the town (“prica se”)*

The most common way for people to hear what is going on in the Programme is through neighbours or friends that they meet as they go about their daily business, on the market, in the street, over a cup of coffee at home or in the café. An important issue for the Programme is whether people follow-up on the stories they hear around town. The openness and accessibility of the Programme is crucial, as well as identifying the local opinion makers and keeping them informed (see below). The role of rumours is also worth bearing in mind.

- *Local staff*

This was an often-mentioned channel. And when people say local, they mean from Topola. Staff from Belgrade might many times as well be from Sweden, since they are not “from here”. Field workers were often told “you are from here, you would not lie to us” implying that they would still be around for people to hold them personally accountable to promises made. This shows how vital it is that all members of staff fully grasp the Programme and its approach, since drivers and secretaries are just as (or more) likely to be the interface between the Programme and the community as facilitators and programme managers. Also, the local staff are the ones who will remain after the Programme has left, so building their capacities is an investment in the long-term future of the community.

- *One-to-one communication*

However exhausting it could be for the staff, there was no way to get around the one-to-one communication. Many people who did contact the Programme stressed the importance of the openness of the staff and their ability to listen, in particular as a way past the initial suspicion. Some of those who stood in the lines in the beginning, hoping for credits, turned out to be those key individuals who are prepared to be drivingforces for change, and who will continue to be so after the Programme has left.

- *Staff in the field*

For many in the community, TRDP is personified by Ivanka, Vlada, Pero and other fieldworkers that they meet in their village. Their approach, language and ability to connect with people is crucial, since the people they meet often are sceptics with a “wait and see” attitude. It is essential that these fieldworkers are well integrated into and supported by the rest of the Programme.

- *Key persons*

Identifying and reaching out to those key individuals that are trusted in their neighbourhood is important, since they have a lot of influence over how people around them perceive things. Call them the “ambassadors” of the Programme, if you like. Openness, flexibility and informal paths are central to reaching these people.

- *Workshops*

The workshops provided space for the Programme to explain a more complex message, as well as allowing people to ask questions and come with feedback. It is essential, however, that the language used at the workshop is understood by the participants (anglicisms and development-speak is not a hit in the villages around Topola).

- *Evaluation exercises*

The Programme has a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation dimension particularly within the Community Facility, where participatory evaluation is built into an ongoing cycle of workshops. This is an important way to get feedback about the Programme, as well as encouraging people to reflect on how their lives have changed throughout the process. Language is again an issue, where sloppy translations of words like “evaluation” and “implementation” can be off-putting for those whose views the Programme needs.

- *Concrete results*

This was very important to many in Topola, who otherwise were quick to dismiss the Programme as “all talk, no action”. One woman who understood the Programme and was among those who first joined its activities was mocked by people around her (“why would someone as old as you want to go to a computer course?”) until they could see a concrete result from her involvement (a textile factory, employing 50 women). “Only then would I have been able to become an ‘ambassador’ for the Programme,” she said. There needs to be a balance of course, since rushed and ill-conceived projects quickly will be exposed by a local community that is suspicious from the start.

- *Presentations*

The Programme made several public presentations, among others to present the results in the Progress Reports, where people could come and listen and ask questions. These presentations tended to attract people who were relatively well-informed about TRDP already. By paying attention to language and keeping the presentations easy accessible, a greater audience might be reached. However, considering the “circles” mentioned earlier, it should not be seen as a failure that it is the same people who tend to come to presentations. They will in turn talk to their families and neighbours of what they have heard.

- *Noticeboards*

The level of interest for the information on the noticeboards seem to differ from village to village, and this research has been limited to decipher all the different factors at play here. However, the noticeboard placed on the main bus station, where people wait for their buses, is well-read. The format of the noticeboards favours the use of a simple and straightforward language and message, with concentration on activities and concrete results rather than process.

- *Leaflets*

2,5 years after the door-to-door delivery of the leaflets, no-one seem to remember them. In general, it is important to think through who is the recipient of the leaflet and to adjust the language and content accordingly.

- *Media*

Only a few people referred to hearing or reading about the Programme in the media. As a one-way kind of communication, the limitations of this channel need to be acknowledged, even though it can serve well as a complement to other channels. Perhaps a show on the radio where listeners can call in to ask questions could be a more interactive way of using the media-channel.

- *Information with bank statements & water-bill*

Sending invitations to the local companies attached to the daily bank statements to the local businesses proved to be a good way to reach this sector. It is targeted information to a relatively well-defined group that can work well. The idea of attaching information with the water bill had not been tested at the time of this research, but it could be a possible path if one wants to reach all citizens.

- *Web-site*

The amount of people in Topola having access to internet is negligible, so the TRDP-website does not serve as a channel to communicate with the local community.

Though not strict in order, the people-based channels in the first half of this list tend to allow for higher quality communication, than the mass-communication channels towards the end of the list. It is the *exchange* of messages, of questions and answers and follow-up questions, that foster trust and encourages action. Among the channels based on one-way-information, it is the targeted messages to local businesses (with their bank statements) that seem to have had most success.

As an end-note to this list, it is worth mentioning that there is no theatre in Topola. Research elsewhere shows, however, that encouraging a local drama group to put up a play dealing with issues that are complex and difficult to explain can be a way to bring it to peoples attention. For example, picture a drama that deals with the issue “what does development mean in Topola?”.

The circumstances placed particularly high demands on the efficiency of the communication between the TRDP and Sida Belgrade.

Sida's role in the communication

One important lesson to be drawn from the TRDP experience is the fact that signals are sent out, and communication happens, even when it is not part of a deliberate communication exercise.

The fact that the communication – as seen from the local community – started even before the Programme came to town, implies that Sida has to consider strategy at an early stage in the planning process.

The expectations and experiences of the local community need to be taken into account, so that – as in this example – the focus does not end up being on the amount of money in the budget. It is clearly not enough to stress this during discussions with the local representatives, when they are in Stockholm.

Once the implementing organisation had arrived in Topola, Sida's role became different, with the newly established office of Sida in Belgrade taking on more of a “supporting act” to the TRDP itself.

The problems caused by the lack of a coordinated communication strategy on part of the Programme and of Sida, were unfortunately ex-

acerbated by uncertainty in TRDP as to how to interpret Sida policy into the local context. Which projects would be ok to support and which not?

When the Programme identified projects they were not sure fitted into Sida's mandate, they would sit down with Sida Belgrade to discuss them on a needs basis. However, with the enormous influx of visitors, and the general challenges of getting a programme off the ground, this was a frustrating procedure for the Programme staff. They felt they spent a lot of time "guessing" how to interpret Sida guidelines, which of course effected the communication with the community.

At other times, it took longer than expected for projects to be approved by Sida, so that, for example, education that had been planned for farmers during the winter season, had to run during the summer, when in fact they did not have much time to attend. For months, the Programme could only tell the farmers "we have to wait and see". This affected the communication with whole segments of the community.

With some of these difficulties inherent in all new programmes, it is worth emphasising that the circumstances placed particularly high demands on the efficiency of the communication between TRDP and Sida Belgrade.

Today, when the Programme is reaching its end, there are disappointments on both sides and a mutual feeling that things could have been much better. It seems that the ability to always pick up the phone or to send a quick e-mail was not sufficient to maintain good communication in between the visits to Topola by the Sida programme coordinator.

Therefore it is essential, at the beginning of a programme cycle, to build a strong joint understanding of the communication challenges ahead and how to solve them. One suggestion during this research was to have joint workshops around this at the start and the end (when the realities on the ground are clearer) of the inception period, where solutions to concrete examples are worked out. A common starting point can then be the foundation of the continued relationship and communication between the Programme and the Sida office.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- *Early planning.* Communication must be thought through already at the planning stage of a programme. It should take into account the local context in terms of expectations and experiences as well as a broad range of communication channels. With communication being a *tool*, the focus should be how to use it effectively.
- *Two-way process.* Communication should not be equated with information. It is a broader concept which entails a two-way process which involves an exchange of messages (a dialogue). Quality feedback will help the programme to become better.
- *Tool vs objective.* The different communication “axes” needs to be dealt with separately. In particular, communication as a *means* should not be mixed up with communication as an end in itself.
- *Integrated part.* The communication strategy should be an integrated part of the programme, and not a reserve for “experts”, since all those working for a programme play an important role in the communication with the community.
- *People-based.* The most important communication channels in a programme are people-based. Therefore all members of staff need to fully grasp the programme and be aware of its communication aspects. They should go through an exercise-based training in how to explain the programme’s aims and objectives to people with different background and level of education.
- *Know your target group.* The communication strategy should take into account that different groups have different communication needs, and that the communication should be adjusted to the target group. This is particularly important in the case of information campaigns.
- *Start off together.* The communication strategy should be complemented with joint Sida/Programme workshops at the beginning and the end of the inception period, where the communication challenges are assessed and where Sida’s policy is translated into the local reality.

Sida policy states that communication is “a tool to create participation, to achieve objectives and to contribute to dialogue and good quality”. Yet, there are still many lessons to be learnt about how to go about it in reality. This report tells the story of the experiences of one programme in Serbia. Like many other programmes, it did not have a communication strategy. The first part of the report looks at how this affected the Programme, and how a lack of understanding of the role of communication led to a misdirected information campaign. The second part of the report analyses the de facto communication between the Programme and the local community. It looks at what the Programme wants to achieve with its communication and at the efficiency of the channels used. It also includes a section on Sida’s role in this. The report ends with more general conclusions and recommendations that could be useful for Sida and for other development programmes.

Halving poverty by 2015 is one of the greatest challenges of our time, requiring cooperation and sustainability. The partner countries are responsible for their own development. Sida provides resources and develops knowledge and expertise, making the world a richer place.



SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY

SE-105 25 Stockholm Sweden
Phone: +46 (0)8 698 50 00
Fax: +46 (0)8 698 56 15
sida@sida.se, www.sida.se