

Communicating Sustainable Development

A practical guide for communications and media professionals



Alliance of communicators for sustainable development

Part 3: Communicating Sustainability

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Part 3: Communicating Sustainability	3
Introduction	4
Sustainable development's main dimensions	4
1. Environmental	4
2. Economic	5
3. Social	5
4. Institutional	5
Imperatives of sustainable development	6
The importance of culture in communicating sustainable development	8
Understanding culture	8
1. Ideal (non-material) dimension	8
2. Materialistic dimension	9
3. Organisational (sub) dimension	9
Culture, communication and sustainable development	10
Promoting social change towards sustainable development	11
Facilitative strategy	12
Re-educative strategy	12
Persuasive strategy	13
Power/coercive strategy	13
Mixed strategies	13
Mass communications as a tool for social change towards sustainable development	14
Sustainable development, mass media and agenda setting	14
Conclusion	16

Part 3: Communicating Sustainability

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Introduction

Cultural elements such as values, aspirations and communication play a fundamental role in the processes of policy and decision making which determines the relative sustainability of society. The mass media, including TV, radio and the press, have become some of the most important 'communicators' in today's society, influencing values, aspirations, expectations and thereby behaviour. The imperatives of sustainable development now confront communication professionals as cultural issues in policy and development initiatives. If communication professionals are to be effective in the 21st century in implementing sustainable development policies, they must engage the mass media to both reach a wide audience to increase the dialogue on public policy and environmental issues, and to ensure the principles and perspectives associated with sustainable development are in wide circulation in our culture. To accomplish these goals, communications initiatives should be planned to accompany many sustainable development policy initiatives. This report aims to raise some key issues that communication professionals need to be aware of to maximise the effectiveness of their strategies when dealing with the mass media during the planning and implementation of sustainable development communication initiatives.

Sustainable development's main dimensions

Sustainable development is a set of multi-dimensional principles and practices created in response to the recognition of threats to the planet's ability to support life associated with present forms of development and economic behaviour (UNCED, 1987). Because sustainable development encompasses both environmental and human systems, it was initially seen to involve factors in three key dimensions: environmental, social and economic. However, since sustainable development initiatives have begun to be implemented, another dimension has become visible. Because the initiatives, which meet the requirements of the three dimensions of sustainability, are implemented through 'institutions,' and since meeting these requirements simultaneously presents great challenges to these institutions, a fourth dimension of sustainable development can be identified: the institutional dimension (SustainAbility, 2002). The main dimensions can be listed as follows (Holland, 1999; Dresner, 2002):

1. Environmental

- Resources: renewable and non-renewable
- Pollutants
- Life support systems: habitat, biodiversity, energy, water, and atmosphere

2. Economic

- Capital wealth creation and productivity
- Resilience of economic systems
- Sustainable employment and wealth distribution
- Sustainable profitability
- Effective markets

3. Social

- Population control
- Individual and community health:
 - Food, clothing, shelter/housing
 - Safety
 - Education and information access
 - Self-realisation
- Social structures
- Culture and heritage
- Stable and fair governance
 - Security, justice and compassion
- Values, beliefs and ideologies
- Information, education and research systems
- Equity and tolerance

4. Institutional

- Planning systems
- Political and governmental decision-making systems
- Justice, legal, and peace/order-keeping systems
- Crisis response systems
- Corporate systems
- Health-care and other social support systems

- Educational and research systems
- Leisure and recreation systems

The above list of dimensions can be extended and organised in many ways and all of the above elements operate in an interdependent fashion. However, the important point is that sustainable development focuses on how the first dimension, the environment, is ultimately impacted on by activity connected with the other three dimensions. Without a healthy environment, the social, economic and institutional dimensions will quickly unravel.

Many of the problems of environmental degradation and resource over-exploitation are the result of human economic activity, predicated on the prevailing economic models of the ecosphere (Davis, 2000). At present, the dominant worldview, as manifested in economic theory, sees human systems as separate and independent from the ecosphere. Rees argues that human systems are simply a subset of ecosphere systems because without the ecosphere that supports life, humans would not survive. Rees and other ecological economists, argue that, because economic activity does not include ecosystem limits in planning, decision-making, and pricing mechanisms, the prevailing economic model is inaccurate. They can, in large measure, be seen as a primary cause of society's present unsustainable course. This view of human/ecosystem relationships sees human systems as subsystems of the global ecosystem, because humans are entirely dependant on flows of resources and life-support services from the ecosphere.

The important point to be made is that the ecosphere, as the *locus* of the planet's life-support systems, must be protected from extensive or irreversible damage or human systems (social and economic) will become unstable. Therefore, if human societies are to survive and prosper, development must take place in a manner which meets both human and ecosystem needs in order to achieve a condition of ecological and geopolitical stability (Davies, 2000; Fisher, 2003).

Sustainable development practices recognise the limits of the capacity of the earth's ecosystems to survive human-caused disturbances, both chemical and physical (Davies, 2000). The Brundtland Report (UNCED, 1987) suggested that with current development practices, those limits would be exceeded within the next century as the world's population reaches 10 billion. However, development cannot simply stop since the current and the additional population must have food, housing and other goods and services. Therefore, in order to be sustainable, the impacts of development and consumption on the planet must be reduced through changing business and development practices so as to align them with ecological principles and constraints.

Imperatives of sustainable development

In most organisations and corporations, sustainable development professionals focus on developing options for, and analysing impacts of, future action. Planning is a key issue for sustainable development. The mandate for communication

professionals when dealing with sustainable development initiatives can be summed up in the primary goal of sustainable development: to achieve a good quality of life for all within the ecological capacity of the earth's ecosystems (Fisher, 2003). Rees states this goal has two fundamental aspects: geopolitical security and ecosystem health (Davies, 2000). This goal includes several imperatives (Dresner, 2002; Fisher, 2003; Davies, 2000):

Protection The earth's ecosystems must be protected from disturbances that can threaten their ability to support a good quality of life for all.

Repair Ecosystem damage must not only be stopped, the damage needs to be repaired.

Efficiency Consumption of energy and resources must be undertaken in the most efficient way possible in order to conserve resources and reduce waste.

Intergenerational equity Sustainable development is fundamentally about future generations and their right to inherit a planet in as good a condition as it was when present generations inherited it.

**Emergency/
preparedness** Recognising that disasters, from both natural and human causes, will occur, planning for these disruptions should be undertaken.

Enhancement Beyond protection and efficient development, development should take place in ways that enhance the health and resilience of social, economic and physical systems to ensure their stability over the long time horizons consistent with sustainability.

A development, policy or initiative, is seen to be sustainable if it meets the imperatives of sustainability in each dimension. If these are not dealt with, the initiative will be likely to encounter significant destabilising forces in the future. More importantly, the health of global ecological systems, which are impacted by local initiatives, must be ensured by meeting these imperatives or the resulting regional and global environmental instability will destabilise both economic and social systems.

The importance of culture in communicating sustainable development

The fundamental issue in sustainable development is how the human sphere interacts with the ecological one, therefore, a framework for structuring sustainable development analysis and policy development must have both an ecological and human (including social, economic and institutional systems) dimension. The ecological dimension will necessarily be more technical, focusing on the science of ecology, and will involve the design and implementation of policy and developments to meet ecological performance targets. However, the cultural aspects, connected to the institutional behaviour that will be necessary to set and meet the targets or to plan and design a policy or development, are key to sustainable development. Therefore, communication professionals, while developing initiatives to meet ecological performance targets, will need to focus on cultural issues, since the changes in human and institutional behaviour, necessary to meet the targets, will be fundamentally defined by cultural dictates (Davies, 2000).

General knowledge of the issues of sustainable development and the options to deal with the issues is one of the first steps to addressing the cultural foundations of unsustainable development (Sharma, 2003).

While sustainable development imperatives address societal behaviour that is negatively impacting the earth's ecosystems, the ideology, rationale and motivations behind the behaviour, lie within the terrain of culture. Therefore, societal changes toward sustainability, will be debated, developed and struggled over, on a cultural playing field. Since communication professionals focus on developing and recommending options for present and future actions, they can be more effective if they understand the dimensions and processes of culture (Sharma, 2003).

Understanding culture

Culture is generally defined as a blueprint according to which the members of a society or a group go about their daily lives (Fuchs, 1995). Culture can be seen to be both indistinct and very real at the same time. A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members (Geertz, 1973). Culture is a multitude of shared values, shared beliefs, and common expectations around which people organise their lives (Fuchs, 1995).

Culture can be seen as having material, ideal and organisational aspects. The *materialistic* aspects of culture include the set of observed behaviours and material objects that are involved in people living with their environment. The *ideational* or *nonmaterial* aspects of culture include the set of values, beliefs, standards and rules for behaviours governing individual and societal behaviour. The *organizational* aspects can be seen as a manifestation of both ideational and material aspects occurring when humans organise and act as a collective. These three dimensions can be summarised as follows (Alexander, 1995):

1. Ideal (non-material) dimension

- Values and beliefs

- Customs, traditions, and rules defining permissible variations in behaviour
- Systems of meaning and symbols
- Knowledge, ideas, ideologies, philosophies and historical memory
- Artistic expression
- The ability to transmit culture to the next generation (communication) which includes languages

2. Materialistic dimension

- The range and patterns of social behaviours
- The economic means of production
- Technology
- Resources
- Techniques

3. Organisational (sub) dimension

- The economic system
- Science and technological innovation
- Institutional structures
- Policies and legislation
- Information systems
- Planning systems

These dimensions are so intertwined in reality that it is difficult to separate them. The cultural factors from the ideational dimension have a great effect on the material and organisational dimensions. Ecosystems are impacted by the activity connected to the organisational and physical dimensions, both of which largely stem from the characteristics of the ideational dimension (Holland, 1999).

However, society is not culturally homogenous. It is made up of many small groups, called subcultures (Fuchs, 1995), which can be seen to share unique cultural values, patterns and behaviour. Some subculture groups identify themselves as promoting sustainability, thereby potentially alienating other groups holding contrary opinions. The characterisation, by some business groups, of environmental protection legislation as being the result of the government bowing to pressure from environmentalists is an example of a conflict between subcultures. Communication professionals consequently face challenges in 'de-politicising' the goals of sustainability; connecting the concepts and imperatives of sustainability to the mutual interests of all groups or subcultures.

Two of the most important elements to examine when identifying and engaging subcultures are the 'identity' characteristics and the 'social rules for behaviour' that exist within each subculture. This flux in identity and its associated changes in values, beliefs and actions, present challenges to communication professionals who must stay abreast of stakeholders' characteristics (Davies, 2000).

The ability to influence others is simply a mechanism by which anyone can use ideology to exercise power in society. Ethical issues arise, however, around how and why one would try to influence others. Through advertising and other initiatives, many, including corporations, governments and interest groups, try to shape culture and influence individual and group behaviour for many purposes. Since implementation activities for sustainable development initiatives will take place in a cultural terrain where many are exercising power through attempting to influence others' perceptions, communication professionals will be more effective if they understand these processes, including the relationships between ideology, communication and leadership, and respond in a proactive manner (Davies, 2000).

Every individual, on a daily basis, invents or reinvents a way of life by drawing on new or old cultural and subculture patterns in each dimension of culture. The malleability of cultures is especially evident in global trends, in both behaviours and values, which are promoted through the mass media. Communication professionals are called upon to be 'leaders' in integrating the issues and goals of sustainability into their work (Davies, 2000). Because communication professionals are involved in promoting policy and development structures within which society functions, the cultural values that communication professionals reproduce in their work can have an impact on the relative sustainability of society.

Davies' (2000) view that communication professionals need to take a leadership role in promoting sustainable development suggests that communication professionals need to be promoters of cultural change. In order to effectively interact with the complexities of subcultures and cultural reproduction processes, communication professionals need to understand the relationship between culture and communication.

Culture, communication and sustainable development

One of the most important cornerstones of culture is communication. It is through communication that individuals and groups are socialised, interact with others and pass cultural elements onto the next generation. More importantly, it is through communication that power is exercised in a culture, through persuasion and the exertion of influence on values, identity and other cultural elements. The relationship between culture and communication is important to understanding how social change, the mass media, and the promotion of sustainable development interact.

A range of ideologies is in circulation within a culture and in its subcultures at any moment in time. These are used by individuals and groups to give a conceptual

structure to their lives, relations, and behaviour. The particular set of ideologies in circulation in a culture at any point in time will differ from other points in time. This set is created through the interaction of individuals and groups, each putting forth their ideas and values through various means. Those who can more effectively shape the consciousness of others can gain a certain amount of cultural power or hegemony. Many individuals and groups purposefully try to shape the consciousness of others through the promotion of various ideologies. Thus, culture becomes a site of ideological and hegemonic struggle, a struggle that communication professionals must engage if they are to effectively educate the public and stakeholders in the issues and imperatives of sustainable development. Effective communication, including mass communication through the mass media, is key to this engagement.

In sustainable development plans, communication professionals and policy makers often call for the 'education' of the public or other stakeholders, however, few develop communication strategies to contribute to that education. In some cases, communications or education plans are developed but not implemented. On the other hand, many other individuals, groups and corporations create mass communications strategies to promote their interests. As a consequence, sustainable development initiatives can often get out-competed on the stage of public policy discussion.

Since sustainable development planning requires changes for many aspects of society (Davies, 2000) and since mass media is an effective tool for initiating and influencing public discussion (Lull, 1995), communication professionals can increase their effectiveness in sustainable development policy creation and implementation if they learn to effectively use mass communication. However, communications planning presents some challenges. In order to effectively engage the mass media in the promotion of sustainable development initiatives, communication professionals need to understand the importance of promoting social change towards sustainable development.

Promoting social change towards sustainable development

Communication professionals may need to encourage social change when promoting sustainable development policies and that process may involve communication professionals acting as social change agents. Because social change is a complex and systems-oriented process, communication professionals need to develop strategies to guide this aspect of their work. There are generally five types of strategies open to those who would act as an agent and promote social change in terms of attitude or behaviour in a target group (Harper, 1993):

Facilitative strategies These focus on stakeholders discussing the issues and mutually finding solutions.

Re-educative strategies These focus on educating stakeholders on the issues, options, and changes that need to take

issues, options and changes that need to take place.

Persuasive strategies These focus on persuading stakeholders to make changes.

Power/coercive strategies These focus on forcing stakeholders to make changes.

Mixed strategies These focus on a mix of the above strategies used at different times during a change process.

Promoting change, through any of the above strategies, involves three elements:

1. *The change agent*,
2. *The change desired* in behaviour or attitudes; and
3. *The target population*: individuals, groups, organisations, communities, societies

Each strategy has strong and weak points, depending on the particular characteristics of these three variables (Holland, 1999):

Facilitative strategy

- In this strategy, the change agent's role is to provide information and resources, cooperate with groups involved, and illuminate the issues.
- This strategy is effective when the problems to be addressed are clear, the goals are broad, and stakeholders are willing to learn and change.
- This strategy is less effective when there is resistance to change, especially in powerful stakeholder groups and/or the change must take place quickly.

Re-educative strategy

- In this strategy, the change agent's role is to present information objectively to groups involved.
- This strategy is effective when the benefits of the change are clear, the groups involved have fears about the change and do not have the requisite knowledge and skills, but are capable of responding.

- This strategy is less effective when the benefits of the change are not clear, there exist strong feelings connected to the change that overpower the rational arguments, or unbiased/objective information is not available.

Persuasive strategy

- In this strategy, the change agent's role is to argue persuasively for a change using more emotionally based arguments.
- This strategy is effective when the groups involved are capable of changing but are unaware of the need to change or the benefits of a change, and/or there is little objective information available to present rational arguments for change.
- This strategy is less effective when the change agent has low credibility in stakeholders' eyes, the group mistrusts the information or facts in the argument, or the groups are not capable of changing due to a lack of skills or resources.

Power/coercive strategy

- In this strategy, the change agent's role is to set the standards, punish non-conformance and create and exercise a monopoly on the rewards associated with conformance.
- This strategy is effective when the change required is supported by accepted social values and a majority of those in the political system who can punish non-conformance, and the changes asked for are primarily behavioural.
- This strategy is less effective when the changes are complex, alienation in the involved groups is undesirable, or expensive enforcement systems must be maintained.

Mixed strategies

- In this strategy, the change agent's role is to prioritise which of the above methods to use in what circumstances.
- This strategy is effective when 'freeze and thaw' cycles of education and enforcement are needed.
- This strategy is less effective when ideological attitudes of the groups involved mandate a single strategy.

All five strategies may need to be used by communication professionals when promoting sustainable development policies and the mass communication technologies and industries play a strategic role in each (Harper, 1993). The social changes associated with sustainable development policies will not be adopted by society until the cultural base has been developed to support it. Mass

communications initiatives utilising the mass media, will need to be used in many cases to introduce the issues and proposed changes into the culture.

Mass communications as a tool for social change towards sustainable development

It is important to re-iterate that mass communications initiatives disseminated through the mass media rarely cause rapid or dramatic changes, for many reasons including, the "one-way" character of mass communication. To facilitate change most effectively, discussion and learning must take place that requires two-way communication. "The mass media appear to be more effective in disseminating new information than in (directly) changing behaviour or attitudes. They appear to have little persuasive effect without reinforcement by interpersonal communication in an informal group context. ...Effective persuasion usually requires interactive communication between the change agent and the potential adopters" (Harper, 1993: 130). The mass media are limited in their effects for many reasons:

- Uni-directional - it is a relatively one-way communication.
- Audiences - it offers selective exposure of the message to certain target audiences only.
- Perception - characteristics of engagement of mass communication by audience usually results in selective perception of meanings.
- Retention - audience usually has only a selective retention of messages and meanings.

While the mass media may not directly 'cause' social change, the ideas presented through mass communication often become both normalised and become the topics and ideas discussed inter-personally (Harper, 1993).

Sustainable development has been included in many policy discussions in the last decade. However, partly because the term and its concepts have not figured prominently and clearly in the mass media, politicians often do not find public support for sustainable development policies proposed by communication professionals within their jurisdictions. By using social change strategies, communication professionals can develop effective social change initiatives that promote sustainable development and use the mass media as a powerful aiding tool.

Sustainable development, mass media and agenda setting

The mass media, because of their large audience, is an important player in the exchange of information and meaning between other community members, especially between governments and citizens. The information that the mass media report is often the only information that the public have on the issues and choices being addressed in a policy community. However, the Western model of

media, with its focus on advertising revenues and the resulting close relationship between most mass media organisations and business, flavours the media's relationship with policy community members and with information in general (Lafferty, 2004).

Because of the number of stakeholders and the complexity of many of the issues addressed during the sustainable development policy making process, communication professionals will be presented with many challenges in managing the mass media's involvement. However, the mass media will be involved, whether the planner desires it or not. Therefore, a good course of action for a planner is to develop management strategies to deal with the mass media's involvement and agenda setting characteristics (Huby, 1998)).

There is always plenty of competition for the limited number of places on the political agenda (Huby, 1997). The media help set the public agenda by selecting from the enormous volume of available information items to which they give special prominence or continuing attention. They make judgements as to what government-provided information is publicity that merits dissemination and what appears to be propaganda to be disregarded (Lafferty, 2004).

Mass media institutions essentially compete with each other for a limited audience. Each outlet targets key audiences by matching their programming to the audience's preferences and time of day when they use the mass media. This target audience approach is spawning many so-called 'specialty' channels or magazines that focus on a small segment of the population (Lull, 1995).

Communication professionals involved in sustainable development policy initiatives will need to take into account the political and economic interests held by large mass media conglomerates. A failure to do so may result in negative media coverage at key points in a sustainable development policy initiative; coverage which could de-rail a wide-reaching and expensive policy initiative, far into its process. Communication professionals also need to be aware that each media outlet targets different audiences and the interests and attitudes that characterize these audiences need to be taken into account (Lull, 1995).

Every policy or development initiative will have a specific group of stakeholders in the policy community. The generic policy community includes: government, experts, the mass media, NGOs, the general public and industry. The mass media's coverage can have an effect on other stakeholders in a policy community, especially the general public. The mass media may or may not pick up any angle given to them by an interest group or another stakeholder. The mass media can 'flush latent interests' out of the general public with coverage of contentious issues resulting in a quick expansion of the interests groups involved in a policy initiative. In this way, the mass media can heighten conflict in a policy community and communication plans must take into account critical times in policy development when media silence is desirable (Lull, 1995; Huby, 1998).

The role which mass communication has begun to play in society has made the mass media a key stakeholder in policy initiatives (Huby, 1998). Communication

professionals working on sustainable development policy initiatives can increase their effectiveness by developing communications strategies to ensure the necessary information is being communicated at the right time in an effective manner between members of the policy community, especially with respect to the mass media's involvement. Communication professionals role as anonymous advisors may be compromised by their role in strategically offering information to the media and being accessible to them for their coverage of an initiative.

Communication professionals can use the media to test certain initiatives or policies by getting coverage of the issue in the media to see other stakeholder's reactions. Because the mass media will cover a policy initiative by asking for opinions from the stakeholders and will cross-reference those opinions with those of other 'experts,' communication plans must recognise the media's need for access to credible experts. Policy community stakeholders, especially communication professionals, cannot be seen to favour certain media outlets without compromising credibility and opening themselves to criticism (Lull, 1995; Huby, 1998).

Conclusion

Policy development, by itself, will not create a sustainable society because policy development processes all too often happen with insufficient public education, communication, or cultural subtlety. Policy development processes also rarely have the resources or mandate to engage the social change or cultural issues connected to a sustainable development policy. As a result, many sustainable development policies are less effective than they could be. "Scientific studies and blue ribbon panels appointed to study social problems and make policy recommendations are often ignored in the absence of a larger political climate conducive to change" (Harper, 1993: 220).

If communication professionals are to promote sustainability, they must have a deep knowledge of the sustainable development issues connected to their projects. These issues have local and global aspects as well as social, economic and environmental dimensions. Communication professionals will also need to recognise that they are working within the dimensions of culture when they address the goal and imperatives of sustainable development to develop and implement policy. Communication professionals should be aware of the specific cultural patterns shaping the points of view and behaviours of stakeholders which impact a sustainable development policy or initiative, as implementing a policy may require the promotion of social change.

Because communication is of premier importance in dealing with social problems and the media are one of the most important 'communicators' in Western society, the mass media will be a key player in the development of a sustainable society. With communication initiatives to spread information on sustainable development issues in strategic and persuasive ways, a political climate conducive to sustainable development-oriented initiatives can be promoted. These communication initiatives

will need to include mass communications programs, involving the mass media, to educate citizens on sustainable development issues, options and tradeoffs. Therefore communication professionals will benefit from understanding 'media-culture' connections in their endeavours to develop effective plans to engage these systems in promoting education and dialogue on sustainable development issues.