

Visibility and Scope for Information and Communication Functions in India's Development Sector

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Abstract

The paper investigates the visibility and demand for communication for development (C4D) related careers and functions in the development sector in India. Differentiating between information and communication functions that constitute C4D, the empirical study, based on analysis of popular job websites in the sector, reveals that while the combined share of information and communication job positions account for a miniscule proportion of the overall new openings in the sector, the visibility of communication specific jobs is particularly inconsequential. Corroborating this finding further by triangulating responses from both employers and employees in the sector, the paper calls for the need to acknowledge the relevance of trained communication personnel in programme planning, implementation and evaluation. The paper contends that contrary to popular perception in the field, information and communication functions in the sector need specialised skill sets, and professionals trained in the discipline are better suited for the purpose. Pointing out some key areas where professionals trained in information and communication particularly suit in the development sector in India, the paper argues that the sector should open up the space for such professionals. Academic and training centres need to respond by providing the right type of perspective and training as required by the field.

Keywords: development sector, C4D, information, communication, job websites, NGO.

1.0 Introduction

India has been witnessing a steady growth of the development sector during the last two decades. Not only is the ecosystem of the sector marked by conspicuous presence of a large number of not-for-profit Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) (Mahapatra, 2014), the corporate sector too has emerged as a key player in terms of discharging its corporate social responsibilities (CSR) as an obligation required by national law. The state of course continues to be a major player with a battery of development schemes and programmes for its population. With the emphasis of government programmes being increasingly on a mission mode, meaning that projects have clearly defined objectives, scopes, implementation timelines and milestones, measurable outcomes and service levels, one observes growing professionalisation and corporatisation of the public-sector development initiatives.

Further, international donor agencies operating in the country and global consultancy companies – both Indian as well as from outside – dot the mosaic of the development sector environment in the country today. While the thrust continues to be on conventional programmatic areas, newer fields have come within the ambit of the sector as a response to emerging issues and priorities. Even as activists claim that space for civil society in the country is shrinking due to the regulatory environment, including restrictions on foreign funding of NGOs (Bhatnagar, 2016), the requirement for multi-skilled professionals with high-end expertise and knowledge are on a rise in the development sector. This is attested by the fact that a leading job website catering to the sector in the country, devNetJobsIndia.org, claims that its newsletters reach to 445,000 jobseekers, indicating a vibrant job market for development professionals in the country today. Indeed, one finds considerable number of such jobs being advertised and publicised today– an unprecedented scenario not witnessed even two decades back. As a senior functionary in a prominent international agency in the country who has been in the field for around two decades admits:

In the late 1990s or even early 2000, one had to look out for development sector opportunities mostly in the weekly classified columns in local newspapers. Or, it was just word of mouth that sometimes worked. At best, one could register with a placement agency to get a call for an initial recruitment interview. Things have changed. Today there are dedicated websites that carry large number of job advertisements for the sector.

(Kripa Shankar Yadav, Project Manager, Save the Children, India)

Increasing specialisation of development organisations' thematic intervention areas, compulsion to reconcile interdisciplinary approaches, pressures to demonstrate success among other factors, have all contributed to progressive formalisation of the sector requiring employment of different types of professionals with varied and relevant skill sets, knowledge and expertise. Where do communication professionals stand in this milieu? If communication is so indispensable in development programmes in third world countries as C4D scholars unequivocally claim (Sinha, 2013; Balit, 2010; Melkote & Steeves, 2010; Dagon, 2009; Quarry & Ramirez, 2009; Sparks, 2007; among many others), this question merits serious attention. The current paper attempts to address three specific objectives: one, to elicit the share of information and communication related jobs vis-a-vis other jobs as advertised by the development organisations in India; two, to examine the functional nature of such jobs and determine the skills demanded of such positions; and three, to scrutinise the key potential areas where personnel trained in the field of communication may particularly fit in the sector thereby adding value to the practice of development.

2.0 Theoretical Background

Academic and public discourses on human development, particularly since the early 1960s, have unequivocally emphasised on the relevance and need for communication in the development process. A considerable body of literature in communication for development attests to this fact. In recent times, scholars have disputed that such theorisation is often not manifested in the development sector and there is a wide fissure between the book-view and the field-view as communication continues to remain in the periphery in development programmes. As Sylvia Balit

(2010) rightly points out, communication in development is still a marginalised appendage and is most easily dispensed with whenever there is a budget cut in organisations. In India's context, Das (2017), through his analysis of diverse rights-based NGOs in India, illustrates how the role of communication is undermined in varying degrees in development organisations notwithstanding their ideological and methodological orientations.

Communication as a critical element in socio-cultural, economic and political development continues to be widely articulated in academic and public discourses by scholars. Notably, the concept and thrust of development communication itself has undergone change over time. As Moemeka (1994) points out, equity, social justice, access and participation became integral to such a renewed understanding. Implicit in such a conceptualisation is the crucial distinction made between information and communication. Dagon (2009) articulates that information is a top-down one-way process, while communication is a two-way or multiple dialogic processes made possible through effective participation of all the stakeholders of the development programme. In this sense, the relationship between participatory development and communication is so intense that one cannot be accomplished without the other; in fact, as Dagon (*ibid*) rightly argues, they are synonymous.

Such a distinction is particularly instructive in terms of identifying different information and communication functions in the development sector. Quarry and Ramirez (2009) articulate that information is associated with telling and communication with listening functions. While telling functions relate to public relations and transfer of information and technology and is subsumed within the dominant paradigm of development communication, listening relates to people-centred advocacy and participation. There is also a range of functions that is a mix of both to effect predetermined change, e.g., social marketing and behavioural change. Conceptually, C4D encompasses all these functions, though the thrust may vary depending on the context, need, approach and ideological basis of development agencies.

The distinction between persuasion and understanding also becomes critical here. As Moemeka (1994) argues, communication rejects the idea of persuasion as its chief role and replaces it with understanding as the crucial factor. Communication, in this sense, is a catalyst in the empowering process as local people discover and articulate their genuine problems based on their lived experience, identify root causes responsible for their problem (rather than allowing the external elite experts to do so), and collectively take recourse to actions that will solve their problems – a phenomenon Paulo Freire (1968/2005) terms as conscientisation process. To better exemplify this, when ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) like smart phones are used to disseminate information to the masses, it is an information project in Dagonian sense. On the other hand, when the same ICT is used to engage community in the conscientisation process as has been evidenced in the case of internet radio and Bulloo radio initiatives of CGnetSwara in India (Mudliar & Donner, 2015; Marathe, Neil, Pain, & Theis, 2015), it is clearly a case of communication project. In this case, whether the technology is used more for I or C determines whether it is an information or communication project. Similarly, organisational visibility campaigns are information and not communication exercises. Communication projects need far greater intelligent and holistic understanding of developmental issues and also skills on the part of the facilitator who create an enabling communication environment as Melkote, Krishnatray & Krishnatray (2008) demonstrate through their case study on de-stigmatisation of leprosy.

Scholars have argued that communication roles, ironically though, are heavily undervalued in the development sector in India. Das (2017), for instance, through his experiential case studies

in India, argues that very few organisations in the sector have separate communication departments; most of these departments, wherever they are there, focus on corporate communication and fund-raising activities rather than giving the much-needed critical communication inputs to the development programmes that the organisation runs. Communication often, he contends, is undermined or at best subsumed in development programmes and is taken for granted to be a non-specialised or a generalist task – a conjecture that is fallacious and also earlier articulated by scholars in the global context (Balit, 2010; Dagrón, 2009, Quarry & Ramirez, 2009). These contributions, though highly significant, are either too general based more on personal conviction and experience and lack concrete empirical evidence, or too specific that baulk general applicability. Further, since such contributions refer to a period till last decade, it is pertinent to try appreciate and update our understanding towards the close of the current decade. Also, given that development communication almost invariably forms a core course in programmes like Mass Communication taught in a large number of colleges and universities and also in programmes like Development Studies in India today, an inquiry into visibility of information and communication roles and functions in the development sector in the country today becomes all the more relevant.

3.0 Methodology

Few jobsites dedicated to the development sector have emerged as the main source of information on careers in India's development sector today; these sites also reflect the job trends in the market, particularly in terms of specialised skills and attributes in demand. For the purpose of the current study, a total of two such popular jobsites were studied over a period of three months covering March to May 2017 and attempts were made to identify and examine all the information and communication related jobs. Jobs that either had one or more of the following attributes were selected for content analysis: (i) job titles with the explicit term communication or/and information, (ii) advertisements that sought applicants with academic background in communication or communication related field, and (iii) jobs that were associated with our classification of information and communication related task/s explained in the earlier section. The two websites selected for the study were <http://www.devnetjobindia.org> and <http://www.indevjobs.org>. Their selection was based on the maximum preferences employers, contacted by the author for the current inquiry, expressed for putting their job advertisement. A daily exhaustive review of the job sites was carried out and log sheets – developed for the study and pretested –filled up. Repeated advertisements for the same position during the period were discarded in the study to avoid double counting. Key search-words like communication, information, public relations, documentation, website, reporting, stories, IEC, behaviour change communication (BCC), media, journalism, advocacy, were also used as search-words to identify relevant jobs ads from the job sites. Attempt was made to identify and differentiate information specific jobs and communication specific jobs and those that had elements of both as explained earlier in Section 2. The validity of the data elicited was followed up by responses from key senior functionaries in six international/national level donor and major implementing agencies – four based in National Capital Region of Delhi, and one each in Lucknow and Bhopal; three of the organisations have distinct communication departments while three did not, and in the case of the former, respondents constituted the functionaries of the communication department. The

sample of organisations was purposefully chosen and personal rapport was employed to collect responses from functionaries both through structured questionnaires and in-depth telephonic interviews. Such functionaries are part of the recruitment team for their organisations. The questionnaires had both close-ended and open-ended questions to capture organisational and personal perspectives of the respondents.

In addition to the responses from the key functionaries, responses were also sought from junior and mid-level employees in the NGO sector. The key criteria for identifying this category of respondents was that they had to have at least a post-graduate degree in Mass Communication from a recognised Indian university and were either working in the communication departments or other departments in organisations in the development sector. Responses from a total of nine respondents working in seven organisations in NCR region were received either through a questionnaire or an in-depth telephonic interview.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

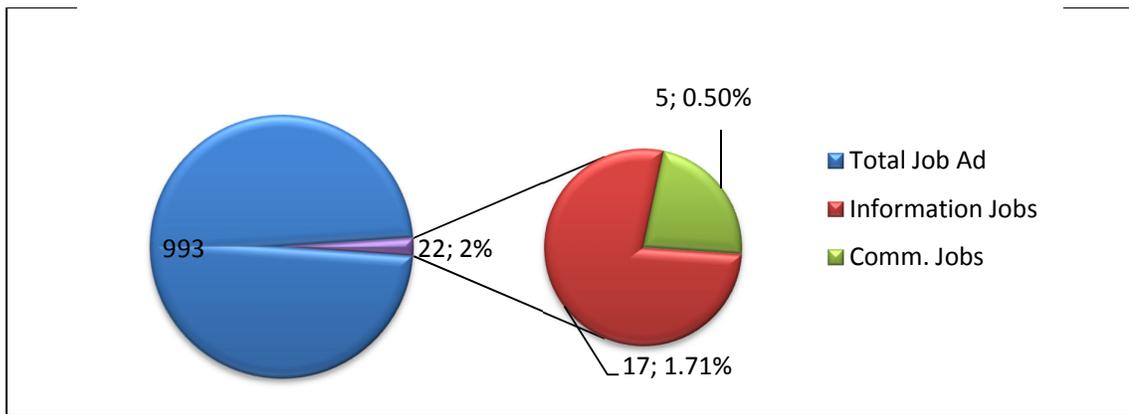


Figure 1. Information and communication job ads on devnetjobsindia.org (March-May 2017)

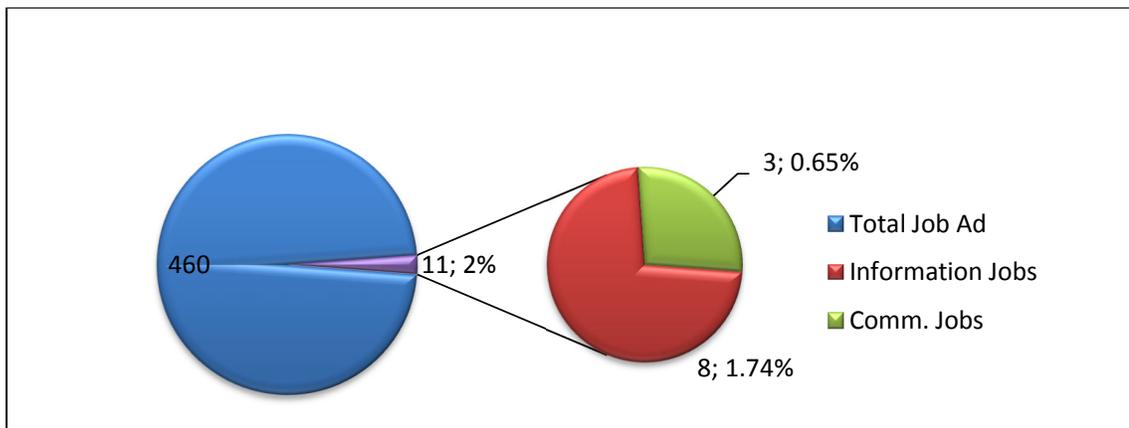


Figure 2. Information and communication job ads on indevjjobsindia.org (March-May 2017)

Figures 1 and 2 report the data elicited from the content analysis of the job sites under study and succinctly reveal the reality from the field in India today. As seen from the figures, a considerable number of positions were advertised by the development sector in India during the brief period of three months indicating that the sector is emerging as a major market for employment of skilled professionals. Ironically, however, there were very few openings for information and communication related jobs. Thus, of the total 993 jobs advertised on devNetJobsIndia.org during the three-month period, only 22 (2 percent) of the jobs could be commonly categorised as information and communication related jobs. An attempt to distinguish between information and communication jobs in the backdrop of our discussion earlier reveals that a miniscule five positions (i.e., less than one percent of the total advertised jobs during the period) were related to hard core communication tasks. The rest of the 17 jobs were information specific jobs that included skills and tasks in PR, report writing, designing IEC materials, developing video footage stories, writing notes for senior management, designing and managing the digital social media, and looking after the website profile of organisations. A stark similarity is seen in the case of indevjobs.org where around 2 percent of jobs (11 out of 460 advertised) had any relevance to communication and information roles. Communication specific jobs constituted a little more than half a percent of the total jobs advertised on the site during the period while information jobs constituted less than two percent of the total jobs. The information and communication positions on both the sites related to mid-managerial and junior levels. Only in the case of two communication jobs – one in UNICEF, a large development player, and another in an international client (name not mentioned in the ad) were there positions for senior levels. Cutting across organisations, a clear pattern emerges reflecting a gross institutional misunderstanding about communication and their failure to distinguish between it and information, and this is further evidenced from interviews with employees in the sector. As a respondent who works as the Communication Officer in one international donor agency, for instance, reveals that her key job roles are to write reports to be sent to its international headquarters and coordinating workshops. Roles for most of such respondents interviewed include event management, assisting in advertising and public relations campaigns, documentation and report writing. It must be noted that while information constitutes an important component of C4D approach, not all information functions can be included in C4D's ambit.

How much does the development sector appreciate the need to have employees trained in communication for communication and information related functions? From the study of the attributes and skill set for the jobs advertised, it emerges that information and communication functions are, as yet, largely not considered specialised functional areas that require special set of skills and perspectives. Thus, of all the 22 information and communication positions/roles jobs advertised on devNetJobsIndia.org, only five required a post graduate degree or diploma in Mass Communication or journalism. The rest did not have mention of any compulsory requirement of communication specific degree, assuming that such tasks do not need any special training, skills and perspectives. In case of indevjobs.org, a glaring similarity is noticed.

When corroborated with the findings from the responses of the employers/senior level functionaries, the picture becomes sharper. As in one organisation, a senior functionary in the Communication Department admits that while they ensure that employees in the department have a post graduate degree or diploma in communication, the primary role the latter are expected to perform are: managing their campaigns on the social media, report writing and event management. In another funding agency, a key functionary in the Communication Department

reveals: “Our division is concerned with branding and PR and we look out for people with experience in advertising, news media, event management; degree in communication is ok (emphasis added), but we emphasise more on experience...” The particular organisation has a separate Media Advocacy Department and its key role is to pitch the success stories whenever received from partner organisations through the Development Department. None, however, in the Media Advocacy Department are from Communication background.

Often, a glaring mismatch between the job title and the job role is observed. Thus, for a position of Communication Officer in one organisation, the job role specified tasks like taking notes of and secretarial assistance. It is clear from this that there is a gross lack of understanding of not only the critical distinction between communication and information in the sector, but also the term communication is very loosely used so as to obscure its meaning far from what it is or is supposed to be. Interestingly, responses received from entry level or mid-level employees in the communication departments in the organisations approached reveal that there is a general lack of clarity even among them with regards to the distinction between information and communication. This applies to also those professionals who had their education in disciplines like Mass Communication raising possible doubts about the course and training that is imparted to the students in the Indian university system. An entry level Communication personnel in a donor agency ironically reveals that her role principally as one responsible for documentation and event management activities of the organisation is in sync with her qualification which in this case was a post-graduation in Mass Communication.

On the issue of how easy or difficult it is for those qualified in Mass Communication to get a job in the sector as such, one employee with background in the discipline who has joined the communication department of an organisation a year back responded: “We are not easily accepted in development sector, until the job is a communication specific one. And there aren’t many communication jobs on the offer.” For those with training in communication willing to join programme divisions there are extra challenges. Echoing in a similar vein, a respondent in a different organisation admits, “I always wanted to be in programme implementation. But wherever I went for interview, almost everywhere, I was asked why somebody from communication wanted to be in the programme sector, as if I was a misfit.”

From the triangulation of the study of the jobsites, responses from employers and that from the employees, one can safely surmise few lessons. One, that communication specific jobs are still not a priority in the Indian development sector; the story is not so different in the case of information related jobs as well, but it is relatively much better than the former. Two, from the examination of whatever little jobs are dedicated to communication and information functions, it becomes obvious that the third sector in India still largely understands it as PR and advertising closely linked to its resource generation needs, documentation, report writing, at best designing IEC materials, and even secretarial assistances. Three, the frequent mismatch between the job titles and the job roles demonstrate that the sector is unable to distinguish between information and communication, thereby drawing parallel with what Dagon (2009) had argued about the scenario in the global context. Four, there is an overwhelming assumption in the professional development sector that communication tasks can be delivered by anyone from other disciplines and not necessarily only by those professionally trained and skilled in the discipline. A serious perspective on communication is yet to emerge in the sector in India.

5.0 Making a Case for Communication Professionals in the Development

The scope for communication professionals in development initiatives in countries like India can be perceived of in at least six broad and significant, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, areas. First, in facilitating the ingenious use of ICTs by the underprivileged and helping them voice and share their issues and taking these to their logical conclusion by assisting them to solve these. The prodigious reach, access and use of affordable smart phones, internet technology and social media even in the rural areas in the world's second largest online market (Internet and Mobile Association, 2018; Doron & Jeffrey, 2013) and enormous potential of these technologies in the areas of development open up scope for such interventions. This is much more than conventional use of social media by organisations for campaign and advocacy (which is one-way top-down communication). Very few organisations in India are known to have imaginatively experimented with using ICTs for kindling the empowerment process; references have been made of such atypical initiatives earlier in section two in this paper. Mass Communication students have a knack for using media technologies. Having undergone a course on development communication they are expected to understand the theory and practice of the field including the societal politics and that of communication like no other from competing disciplines and this holds them in good stead to contribute to such communication functions in development initiatives, particularly in those that subscribe to participatory approaches.

An associated second area can be identified in the realm of traditional and non-traditional alternative media and their potential use by the community in development programs. Use of community radio, community video, community newspaper need not be restricted to projects in themselves but can be well integrated with the development programs of organisations. Quarry & Ramirez (2009), for example, has illustrated how video as a communication method can solve an alarming war-like crisis emanating from a communication stalemate between stakeholders. The exchange of video documentaries made by each group facilitating dialogue between the aboriginal Kaminuriak herd and the state development agencies in Canada in the 1970s stands as classic testimony to the utility of small media technologies in development. This is another area which has not been hitherto explored fully in India despite a positive policy environment. Since students trained in Mass Communication are expected to know the skills of media production and content generation, they enjoy almost an exclusive natural advantage of being community trainers and facilitators in such initiatives.

A third potential area that lends niche for mass communication students in the development sector is in the domain of social movements organisations (SMOs) that struggle to reverse its otherwise skewed relationship with the indispensable traditional news media. News media not only lend credibility to the movements, but also help in mobilising their constituency and in enlarging their scope (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993); however, movements position themselves as poor competitor for sources of news. With a nose for news and professionally trained in news reporting and feature writing for the media and well-grounded in development issues, mass communication professionals in SMOs who spend considerable time in the field have the natural advantage of both covering stories on the life and struggle of the people in the remote areas and contribute untold stories and articles to the news media for publication. Professional journalists whose focus is mostly on urban based events have serious time constraints and often have neither interest nor skills to cover these stories that demand in-depth and investigative reporting. Building linkages between grassroots and the mainstream media and nurturing and sustaining relationships

with the latter is critical for social organisations and personnel trained in the area can play important role in this.

A fourth area that merits attention in this discussion is the field of advocacy in which communication students again have an edge over others. Advocacy entails strategic communication with various key stakeholders: legislators, bureaucrats, judiciary and media (NCAS, n.d). Activists with sound background in communication should be able to design strategic advocacy campaigns with each of the stake holders and implement them. Preparing various advocacy tools like information materials, fact sheets, reports, brochures, etc. is their forte. They are skilled to produce video and audio documentaries as evidences from the grassroots for use in their organisations' advocacy campaigns and in this they outsmart their counterparts from other competing disciplines. In particular, when it comes to media advocacy, their contribution in preparing press kits, press releases, train spokesperson within the grassroots organisation and the community, provide leads to journalists to cover stories of mutual interest, conduct events and press conferences, build and nurture relationship with the news media is unparalleled. Advocacy necessitates a lot of research and literature review including analysis of news media contents. Mass communication-trained personnel with good ground in communication research can employ their skills in this.

Fifth, given the fact that most organisations in the social sector strive to bring perceptible positive change in the attitude and behaviour of the population, social marketing and behaviour change communication (BCC) has emerged as significant C4D strategies that needs specially trained communication persons. These strategies need good understanding of the target audiences for which formative studies are to be carried out. The importance of communication planning can never be undermined in development programmes. Mass communication students ideally learn all these as part of their course and so are in an advantageous position over their counterparts from other disciplines. If information and communication functions are seen as two extremes of a continuum, it is obvious from the above discussion that both have a significant role to play in the development practice in a country like India, but both needs expertise that only a person trained in the area can bring in. Blending of both in various doses depending on problem at stake becomes critical for a communication practitioner to decide. Last but not the least, trained people in communication need to be valued in development organisations in that they can not only give critical communication inputs to the specific development programs, but can also design overall communication programs of the organisations.

6.0 Conclusion

The state, grassroots, national and international NGOs, corporate houses, consultancy groups, donor agencies – all contribute to and constitute the development sector in India. The sector, as this paper indicates, today positions itself as a perceptible field of formal employment for development professionals. Ironically, however, C4D functions in the sector still continue to remain at the margin. Distinguishing between information and communication functions that constitute C4D, the paper attempted to demonstrate that there is general predisposition for the former. Even as C4D job openings in general are few and far between, communication functions in particular are all the more de-prioritised. The examination of the job advertisements by the development sector in this study buttressed by responses from the key functionaries and

employees in the NGOs bear testimony to this. As for information functions, as the study showed, these are not well defined and often spills over into areas that are outside the purview of C4D often making it a generalist domain. It is ironically so despite the overarching theoretical recognition of the significance of communication in development practice. This paper argued for opening up the development sector to properly trained communication professionals who can contribute to the C4D needs of the development programmes.

Of course, not everything is fine with the training of C4D professionals and with the teaching of development communication courses in the country. There is a global consensus today on the dearth of well-trained C4D professionals in the market that is left with no option for the development organisations other than to recruit university graduates with degree in journalism, public relations and marketing; such recruits lack in theoretical and applied knowledge of communication for development strategies (Khanna, 2017). India is no exception. In this respect, an examination of the course curricula on development communication/C4D in the Indian universities would have further benefitted the paper. However, this merits a separate inquiry and was beyond the scope of the current study. Nevertheless, glaring missing link between the development industry and the academic courses in development communication is obvious. There is therefore a rationale for making the academic programmes more practice-based and for building a close linkage with the development sector. Also, there has been a consistent emphasis on information functions in communication courses in the country, and these are largely oriented towards media industry.

As this paper argued, there is a wide scope for communication professionals in the development sector. However, this has not been explored fully. Towards this, both the development sector as well as the communication training institutes should respond positively. The former has to acknowledge that communication is an indispensable idea in development and that it is a highly skilled function and needs special attributes that only a person trained in the field can bring. They have to display their seriousness towards communication by not only recruiting communication personnel for various programmes, but also by setting up dedicated communication departments within, that engages in serious processes.

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