

BOOK REVIEW

EXPANDING SHRINKING COMMUNICATION SPACES

Philip Lee & Lorenzo Vargas (Editors)

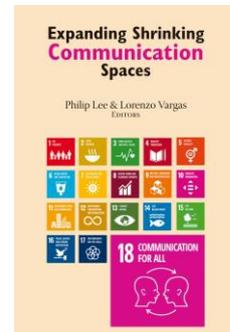
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Expanding Shrinking Communication Spaces

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On 25 September 2015, world leaders adopted the new Agenda for Sustainable Development following a few years of intense negotiations. All UN Member States agreed to adopt 17 Goals as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the Goals. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as we understand from the timeline, have followed on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for 2015 that had been established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000. Building on the work done earlier, the SDGs are related to the successes and issues that arose from the efforts to support the MDG. While some general goals stayed consistent throughout the revision process there was also a major shift due to certain priorities.

The SDGs have been criticised for having a potential inconsistency particularly between the socio-economic development and the environmental sustainability goals. Critiques also raise questions on if and whether the SDGs can be measured and monitored. This book, *Expanding Shrinking Communication Spaces* adds another critique. “Conspicuous by its absence was a dedicated Goal addressing the essential role played by communication, even though there are related targets...” assert Philip Lee and Lorenzo Vargas, editor of the book in their introduction. According to them, the genuine sustainable development and equitable access to information and knowledge requires an additional SDG that is distinctly missing from the United Nation’s list. Lee and Vargas propose an additional goal namely SDG 18: Communication for All. The importance of communication in achieving sustainable development is increasingly acknowledged by international agencies, government and NGOs. This book expounds the reasons communication rights and sustainable development are inextricably linked.

Communication is a fundamental feature of humanity. It is about dialogue, participation and the sharing of knowledge and information among people and institutions. The ability to communicate is central to human interaction and participation. To understand and to be understood not only enables expression of basic needs and wants but also enables interaction and participation at all levels – family, community, national and global level. Communication rights to freedom of opinion, expression and language enables people to realise other human rights including the right to education, work, marry, have a family, own property, self-determination, as well as the freedom of religion and social security.

A landmark essay written in 1999 by the late Michael Traber is included in this book as Chapter Three. Dr Traber who died in 2006, was a sociology and mass communications expert. In his chapter titled “Communication Is Inscribed in Human Nature,” he likened communication to the nervous system of the human body. If the nervous system breaks down, the wellbeing of the entire body is under threat. He also stresses on the right to public communication for all. Communication rights were actually articulated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which says: Everyone has the right to freedom of

opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

This book further explores how the concept of Communication for All works. It stresses that communication rights take into account the needs and capacities of all concerned in the development process. “No matter the issue – poverty, conflict resolution, self-determination, migration, health, land, housing, the climate crisis – little can be done without effective communication.” Communication for All seeks to “expand and strengthen public civic spaces through equitable and affordable access to communication technologies and platforms, media pluralism, and media diversity.” It also ensures that the voices of everyone including the poor, marginalised, and the excluded are heard, and that their genuine participation is guaranteed.

The provisions in the SDGs, Lee and Vargas argue, do not go far enough and a much broader framework is required – “a framework to enable, empower and transform in order to guarantee the public voices and genuine participation of everyone.” SDG 18 as proposed in this book intends to “expand and strengthen public civic spaces through equitable and affordable access to communication technologies and platforms, media pluralism, and media diversity.” Its four specific targets by 2030 are listed as follows:

1. To ensure the existence of spaces and resources for men and women, in particular the poor and vulnerable, to engage in transparent, informed and democratic public dialogue and debate.
2. To ensure the existence and regimes where creative ideas and knowledge are encouraged, can be communicated widely and freely to advance social justice and sustainable development.
3. To ensure protection for the dignity and security of people in relation to communication processes, especially concerning data privacy and freedom from surveillance.
4. To ensure communication spaces for diverse cultures, cultural forms and identities at the individual and social levels.

The book dedicates a chapter to “Communication and Information Poverty” in the context of the SDGs. The digital age or the information age has produced rapid development in communication due to computer and internet technology. However, the book notes that millions of people do not get the benefits from these developments and they continue to be left behind and to suffer from “information poverty.” Millions of people still have no or limited access to communication platforms; they are under-represented or misrepresented in the media. They are not exposed to relevant and accurate information and knowledge; they are excluded from participation in decision-making processes. Information poverty, according to Lee and Vargas, undermines the vision of the SDGs.

In a different chapter, gender issues in news media content are raised. The writer of this chapter, Sarah Macharia provides evidence that “gender issues in media content remain pertinent and the power to change lies with governments, the media, and ordinary audiences.” It is suggested that governments need to acknowledge the important place of media and communication within the broader objective of promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Another contributor, Dev Kumar Sunuwar describes the role that communications play in creating “spaces for the expression of Indigenous voices” and sharing stories about “the diversity of cultures, languages, and histories.” He stresses that only participatory communication approaches can help promote the voices of people who are often not heard or seen. He further notes that indigenous communities have relatively little access, voice and participation in the mainstream media. Information not available in their mother tongues prevent them from accessing essential news and resources.

This 130-page book in six chapters is intended for development practitioners, policy makers, and communication rights activists. This book can be a good resource on the subject of democratisation of communication and information in order to promote inclusive and meaningful sustainable development.