

Book Review: *Evaluating Communication for Development: A Framework for Social Change*

(2013) June Lennie and Jo Tacchi. London: Earthscan.

Ricardo Ramírez

Independent researcher and consultant, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Wendy Quarry

Independent consultant, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

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This book is a valuable contribution to the body of literature on Communication for Development (C4D). It is intended for academics, researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Our guess is that it will be mainly relevant for academics given its well-researched and minutely detailed style. It will also be of interest to students of the genre, particularly those who have prior experience in the subject. As practitioners, we found that Chapters 5 (evaluation capacity building) and 6 (key approaches, methodologies and methods) were particularly brilliant and could stand alone as a point of reference for a wider mix of readers. In addition, the focus on ethnographic action research is both welcome (like an old friend) and a challenge to implement under the predominant quick-fix focus of development policy.

One of the underlying themes of the book appears to be based on the premise often voiced in the past, that if decision-makers and funders saw for themselves the evidence of impact of a C4D approach they would be moved to build it into their plans and budgets. And here we refer to policy makers *outside* of the C4D sphere (the insiders include many respected names, some from UN agencies who have already complimented the book, as the back-cover demonstrates). We

challenged this notion some years ago¹ stating that notwithstanding an understanding of participation and communication – the decision-makers behind the aid industry prefer to manage projects with finite and measureable time frames; something the authors explain is anathema to the very notion of C4D.

It is not that the authors don't acknowledge the point that the current 'development' world favours overly managed, linear projects that pretend to show impact at the end of the three years: "There is a de-emphasis on participatory processes, de-prioritizing M&E and a fixation on greater efficiency in the disbursement of aid funding." This is not new and the author's search to find alternative evaluation methods to circumvent this problem is the point of the book, a worthy effort – but, outside of the C4D field, who is listening?

It is here where we see the nub of the book's contribution to the literature on communication. The book offers a very full, sometimes repetitive, and detailed synopsis of various approaches to

¹ Quarry, W. 2008. Decision makers do want communication – but they may not want participation (Glocal Times, Issue 10)
<http://ojs.ub.gu.se/ojs/index.php/gt/article/viewFile/2556/2275>

evaluation. The framework in Chapter 2 provides a relevant assembly of underlying concepts that explain the nature of C4D and lay the foundation for systemic evaluation approaches. The authors build an argument that moves from dissecting the linear approaches of the log frame and results based management, to a discussion on complexity theory and systems theory plus the pros and cons of the newly popular, Theory of Change. Such a review is both comprehensive and valuable. In Chapter 6 we are rewarded with a useful description of the various evaluation approaches along with an individual critique on each approach: outcome mapping; developmental evaluation; case studies versus indicators and so on. Throughout the authors are open to the pitfalls in championing any one approach and do not present one in favour of the other. But it is the descriptive case studies of their collaborative work with Equal Access in Nepal and the project with Kothmale in Sri Lanka led by Tacchi that offer the kind of concrete real life example that helps bring the theory of various approaches to life. We would have liked to see more of them and perhaps a discussion as to how rare but rewarding it is to be given the time and space to pursue a deeper approach to communication work while making a plea for more such opportunities.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by justifying the need for a C4D evaluation framework. The framework itself is explained in Chapter 2, and implementation examples are provided throughout, and also in Chapter 7. Chapter 3 would be a very relevant to use in a methodology course in that it covers the ontology and epistemology of C4D with emphasis on systems theory and the complexity associated with social change. Chapter 4 grounds the review in the real world of the development industry. Here the authors emphasize ethnographic action research, developmental evaluation and other creative, participatory and mixed methods approaches that, while challenging to implement, can provide principles and strategies for the effective evaluation of C4D. As mentioned above, and already noted, Chapters 5 and 6 would be our candidates for separate, more practitioner-focused articles.

In Chapter 3 the authors set a goal for themselves: to overcome the dichotomy in evaluation approaches. They do this by analyzing the wider context (the nature of the beast, the ontology) of C4D to underscore the value of their holistic and emergent approach, the epistemology. We especially applaud this effort to appreciate local circumstances and culture; a good reminder for all communication practitioners. We are less

clear that the goal of overcoming the dichotomy is achieved, which is a challenge faced by many writers in this polarized field. Are there ways to minimize or compromise these challenges in the examples?

The book joins a family of publications in the recent years that seek to consolidate this field through rigorous review, while also seeking to advance its methodology. Some writers have sought to capture the wide range of practical experiences around the Globe (for instance Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte's *Communication for Social Change Anthology*, CFSC, 2006 - which was also translated into Spanish). In our view, this new book is more comparable to Cees Leeuwis' *Communication for rural innovation: Rethinking agricultural extension* (Blackwell & CTA, 2004) - in that both explore issues in a thorough and comprehensive manner. Of relevance in that tome is the evaluation challenge that Leeuwis describes for C4D: "It is, methodologically speaking, extremely difficult if not impossible to isolate the contribution of communicative intervention" (Leeuwis, 2004, 317). Lennie and Tacchi lend support to this challenge by emphasizing the systemic and complex nature of development and the importance of evaluation methods that acknowledge the role of communication. The books' major contribution for practitioners lies in the articulation of a systems-oriented and participatory approach to evaluation of C4D. We noticed, for example the very limited attention to evaluation in the recent FAO Sources book on *Communication for Rural Development* (FAO, 2014).

Will this book advance the field of C4D or simply consolidate it in existing circles? Will it become a tool to leverage a more process-oriented view by donors? Donors seem increasingly entrenched in results based management and log frames with a hunger for impact ("show me the goods, now") and little patience for process or acknowledgement of complexity. On the other hand we are discovering that smaller foundations and non-profits are keen to experiment with newer approaches, or with re-discovered ones like Utilization-Focused Evaluation. It may just be that the niche for C4D, especially one that leans on ethnographic action research and complexity-sensitive evaluation, will be in places and projects supported by more innovative and less rigid agencies.