

## **The effectiveness of the communication in community development projects implemented by the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

Non-governmental organizations are based on interested groups of citizens, aiming at providing social services or implementing social policy. The post-colonial socio-economic situation in Sri Lanka created a conducive environment for NGOs, which was accelerated by the political, and subsequent economic changes in 1970s. Presently NGOs contribute significantly to the community development sector in Sri Lanka. NGOs work to improve living standards through community participatory processes, and use communication in all aspects of the project cycle.

The objective of this research is to study the evolution of NGOs in Sri Lanka, the role of local and International NGOs in community development and assess the effectiveness of communication in community development projects.

Two prominent NGOs, Sarvodaya and World Vision Sri Lanka were studied through participatory observations and interviews. Documentary programs and audio-visual material were evaluated.

NGOs use effective communication in their community development projects. Local NGOs pioneer in this regard to international NGOs, as they plan communication in a more people-centered manner. They use conventional and modern media effectively, but the negligibly use social media. Communication strategies need to match the local context planned according to the intervention and target group. Use of communication methodology extracted from the community itself, is high in relevance and effectiveness. From the planning phase onwards, a parallel communication plan needs to be developed. In each phase of the project, different communication strategies such as inter-personal and group communication, participatory development communication, new and mass media etc. can be adapted.

**Key words:** *Communication, Non-governmental organizations, Community development projects, Media*

## **The role of the Non-Governmental Organizations and their initiation in Sri Lanka**

Identification of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating in the civil society is subjective and their composition has to be taken in to consideration. It is always difficult to identify the nature of the NGOs against the other organizations and activist groups operating in the civil society. This can be, to a certain extent, explained by clear identification of the root causes of formation of NGOs. NGOs are commonly community-based organizations operating in the society. But it is always important to analyze their physical existence in the society in parallel to their conceptual and operational aspects.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards the expected role of the affluent and affluent families in the industrial nations in the West was to provide human security and work towards the well being of the common people who were often marginalized in the society. These relief and welfare services were initiated by the upper class and middle class of the society for the betterment of the poor and marginalized populations who were often neglected and excluded in the mainstream development process. In addition to satisfying the material needs of the marginalized populations these people were also helped and assisted with other parallel social problems and issues. From the historical times this has been identified as good and accepted way of resource mobilization from rich to the poor. This compensated the human suffering associated with the wealth accumulation by the rich. These NGOs are referred to as welfare NGOs or benefactor NGOs (Handaragama and Rasnayake, 2011, P: 157).

The NGOs are also defined as voluntary organizations formed by groups of citizens targeting social service or enforcing social policy (Fernando, 2003, P: 03). Handaragama and Rasnayake explain NGOs as any organization that does not include in the Government sector (Handaragama and Rasnayake, 2011, P: 157). They are also defined as organizations or societies operate with non-for-profit objectives and without being intervened by the Governments to deliver rehabilitation, social justice, social welfare, environmental pollution, gender equality, development and human rights (Wickramasinghe, 2001, P: 76). Samaraweera defines NGOs as organizations targeting relief and rehabilitation, social justice, social welfare, environmental protection etc. without motive for profit and representing the Governments (Samaraweera, 1997, P: 03). The United Nations defines the NGOs as 'private organizations that act towards provision of relief to the distressed people, elimination of poverty, environmental conservation, provision of basic social services and community development (Admin, 2012,P: 02). After the Second World War, many States in the world withdrew from direct service provision in social welfare and acted only as facilitators. As the States and Governments had no direct involvement in

addressing the societal needs such as poverty, hunger, diseases etc. the NGOs obliged to fill the gap.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, many States in the Asia and Africa faced severe problem of poverty with the de-colonialization process executed by the world powers in the aftermath of the World War II. With the emerging need, the NGOs started penetrating in to the region to address the poverty. This new ideology of social welfare by the developed nations enabled access to NGOs in the South outside of the national Governmental structures to uplift the living standards of the marginalized and poor. At the beginning the main mandate of the NGOs have been 'care and welfare' and slowly but steadily it evolved in to 'change and development' with the increasing involvements of the Governments in national development and changing context in global priorities and development assistance. Accordingly the NGOs are engaged in projects in a variety of sectors to support development in the developing countries or in the 'third world'. The space for the NGOs to operate in these nations has been created by the absence of the Governments' interventions to address the gaps in these countries. Presently, as it is evident that they are the NGOs effectively and efficiently engage in addressing the public needs in many of the developing countries (Handaragama and Rasnayake, 2011, P: 158). NGOs operate in different forms in the civil society to deliver welfare services and development. When the NGOs in the world are categorized as to the cooperative nature of them, local / national Non-Governmental Organizations (NNGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are important classification.

The World Bank identifies the NGOs as private organizations that provide relief, implement relief programs following the distressed and poor populations without waiting for people to come to them. They also work for environment and nature conservation, community development and work to provide basic social amenities. In providing these services both the national and international NGOs have similar objectives. But the international Non-Governmental Organizations' reach is of global nature, while national NGOs have limited geographic boundaries and they operate locally in any country serving limited populations in limited sectors ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_nongovernmental\\_organizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_nongovernmental_organizations)). As in many other countries in the world, a number of international and national NGOs operates in Sri Lanka.

### **Evolution of NGOs in Sri Lanka**

As to the Sri Lanka context and definitions, NGOs are included in to broader definition as voluntary organization of any kind, starting from a funeral-aid society in a rural village to social movement such as 'Deshahithaishee National

Movement' for social justice. But in the national discussions, NGOs are often referred to the organizations receiving foreign funding and who engage in donor-funded projects in return (A publication of Deshahithaishee National Movement, 2005, the preface).

The presence of national NGOs is evident in Sri Lanka even in the colonial times. But the international NGOs started penetrating to Sri Lanka after 1970s (Ubeysekara, 2006, P: 42). When the newly elected Government in 1977 implemented the economic and political reforms, by liberalizing the economy and introducing the executive presidency, the barriers and limitations for the international NGOs to enter and operate in Sri Lanka has been removed. This also provided space for the national NGOs to emerge and operate freely in Sri Lanka even with the foreign financial assistance. From this day onwards, the influence of NGOs can be seen across social, political, economical spheres in the Sri Lankan society, changing its shape and form time to time. Handaragama and Rasnayake explains that NGOs are presently doing remarkable work in the community development sector; community development involves providing community education and getting them involved in their own development to uplift their living standards (Handaragama and Rasnayake, 2011, P: 166).

### **Communication in community development projects**

The NGOs use the community as the base to their community development work. The definition of 'community' as a concept goes back to 1800s (Niroshinie, 2004, P: 12). As to Niroshinie, the community comprises of a group of people with their own values, norms and identities. Careful observations also reveal that the inefficiencies in the Government sector has widen the space for the NGOs and expanded its role in the modern society.

Development is defined as a process where the living standards of people are enhanced (Aththanayake, 1997, P: 12). To achieve the higher living standards development plans need to be made for specific periods with sets of objectives. Once the World Bank has defined a 'project' as tool to achieve specific development goal within a specified time frame through specific policies and investments (Aththanayake, 1997, P: 76). In the community development projects, many of the times a 'top-down development model' is found. This happens at all levels of the community development project including planning, implementation, appraisal and monitoring phases (Escobor, 1995 and Chambers 1997). But Robert Chambers argue when the communities are stakeholders and community-based projects are considered a 'bottom-up' approach is needed to effectively achieve the project objectives. Therefore the development has to be achieved from grassroots to up as 'patting the lost first' is needed in community development (Handaragama and Rasnayake, 2011, P: 92-93). This ensures

active participation of the project beneficiaries contributing to the quality and sustainability of the project interventions.

Communication is a tool that can be used in all human activities. Communication is considered as basic need in the society. As man spends a corporate social life he needs to know what others in his society doing and the same serves as precursor to the right to information (Aththanayake, 1995, P: 25). Many communication specialists have pointed out the importance of effective communication if the development process. Dr. Nandana Karunanayake, in his book 'communication and development' argues that propagation of information across the developing world through the mass media established an ideology that communication and mass media can be used to gear up national development processes in the developing world.

### **The use of communication by NGOs in Sri Lankan community development**

The research has found out the use of communication is an essential component of the community development projects implemented by the NGOs in Sri Lanka. The use of communication strategy in the community development projects varies with the nature of the project, the target population and also with the communication principles, methods and models. Communication has been used in these projects to mobilize the communities, to provide the skills, and to fit the projects in to the local conditions such as the local culture, attitudes, value and norms. The communication is used in both formal and informal ways.

Sarvodaya, as pioneer national NGO has extensively and effectively used communication as tool to educate and mobilize the communities and to build the team spirit to work towards participatory development through self-help initiatives. From its early days as far as 1960s Sarvodaya has combined the communication and development education to reach thousands of rural communities through its community development projects. The following diagram shows how communication is tested in the different phases of project cycle of the community development projects.

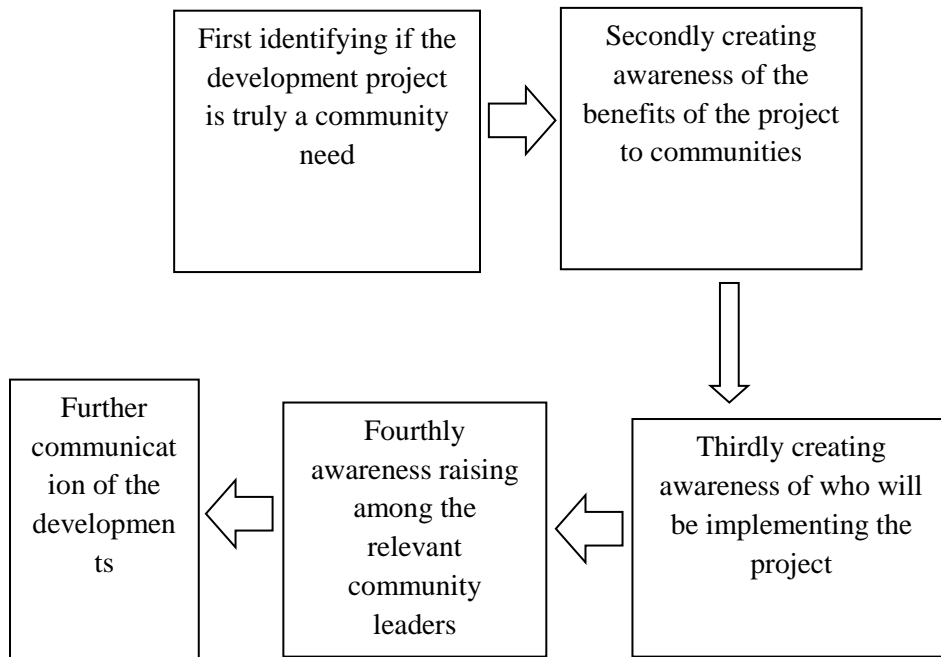


Figure 1: Steps in adapting communication strategy in community development

### **The communication models used by the NGOs and their objectives**

The study reveals that the communication is vital in community development projects. When consider the communication models used by the NGOs, they have most widely used inter-personal communication in their developmental activities through out the world. The use of group communication is also considerable but they very rarely use media including the mass media to take their messages across the society. NGOs have been smart enough to use appropriate communication models and strategies in accordance with the literacy rates, skills, behaviors and capacities of the respective communities. They have also considered the final objective of the community development project, expected results, accountability etc. when selecting communication models in their projects.

### **Communication methods and technologies used by NGOs in community development projects**

The Sri Lankan NGOs use different communication methods in their community development projects. They include inter-personal communication, group communication, 2-step communication models, creative communication etc. For example Sarvodaya initially has formed the structural backbone of the communication as the village societies and has used the same structure to communicate to the community leaders and to beyond. The World Vision has

organized grassroots leaders and grassroots centers to collect and disseminate information and community leaders are gathered subsequently. This is more or less similar to 2-step communication model. The Sri Lankan NGOs have been careful enough to adapt and use the best communication technologies that suit their objectives and capacities. The research also revealed the tendency of use of conventional media by the NGOs when they are communicating with their beneficiaries but they also use modern and new media to communicate with their other stakeholders and partners. The use of new media is becoming popular with the NGOs and mostly an integrated approach of conventional, modern and new media technologies is used.

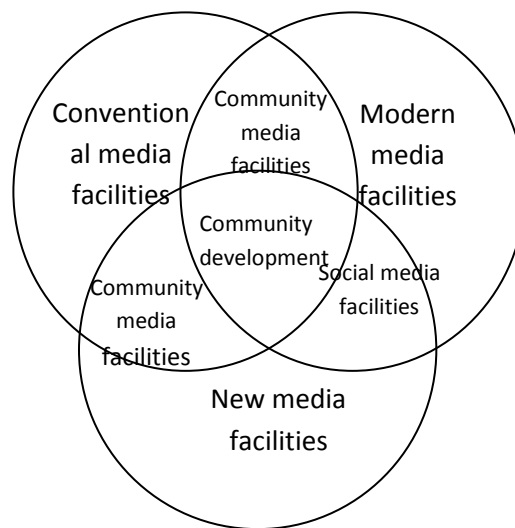


Figure. 2: Use of communication methodologies by the NGOs

Still through out Sri Lanka, and even in the world, the high dependency of the inter-personal and group communication by the NGOs has enforced a threat to the sustainability of the work of the NGOs. Such communication models are high labour intensive and can be expensive under present day financial realities of the NGO world.

### **The use of communication by NGOs to access, empower and mobilize the communities in community development projects**

The main purposes of using effective communication methodology in the community development projects are to guarantee maximum community participation in the projects, creating community awareness and mobilizing the people in the development work. The communication strategies enable

‘participatory concepts’ and also informed stakeholders. The following diagram shows the steps used by the NGOs in accessing, mobilizing, and guaranteeing community development processes. In different development, different communication methods

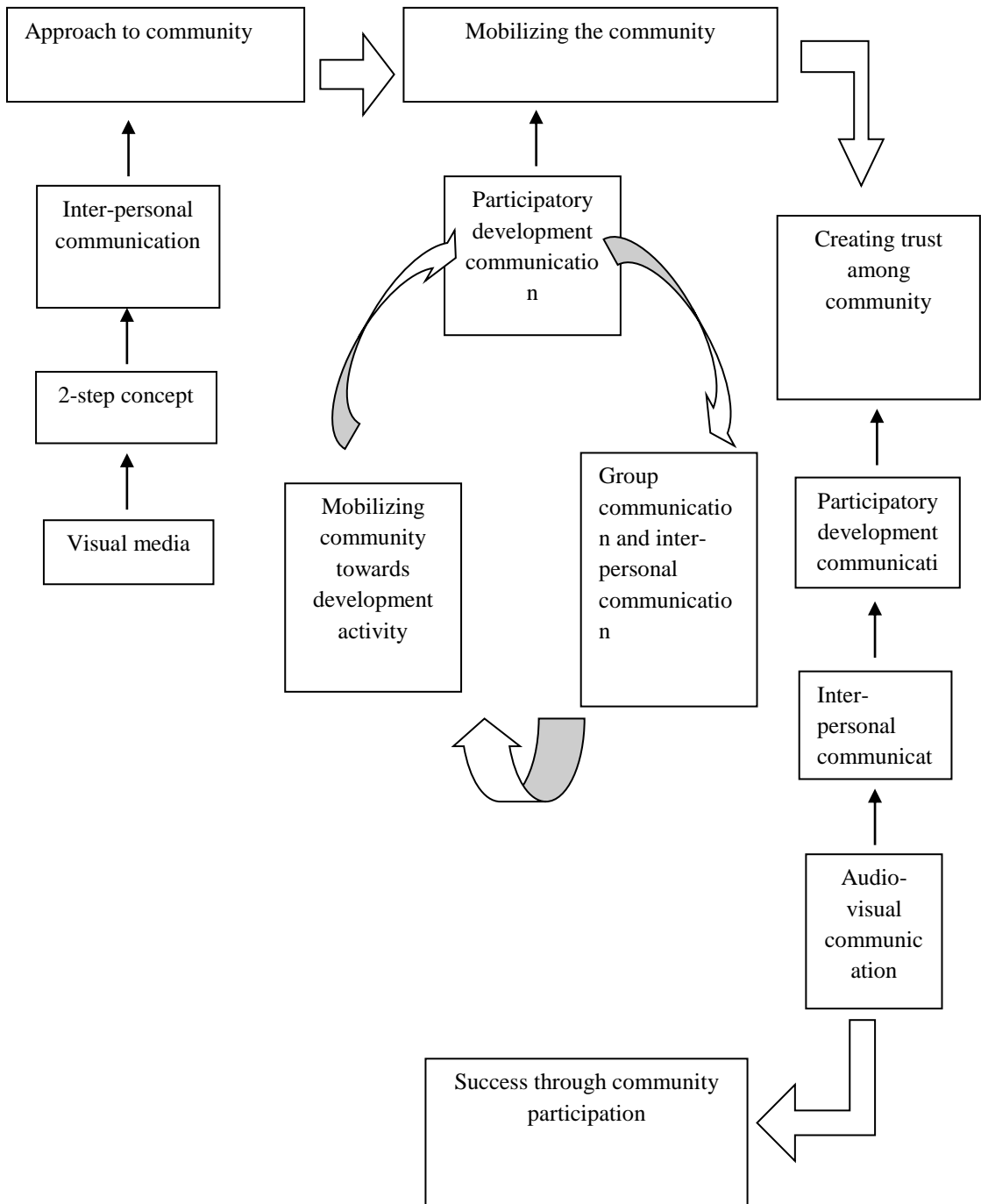




Figure 3: The process of community development and its relationship with communication

**The common experience (successes and challenges) of using communication by Sri Lankan NGOs in community development projects**

The research shows that the communication strategies used by the NGOs in Sri Lanka commonly has been successful in achieving its objectives. Even though failures are documented, the popular experience of Sarvodaya and World Vision has been positive. In many times the failures are associated with low communication literacy of the communities. The main issues and challenges faced by the NGOs in using communication is briefly given in the Figure 4 below.

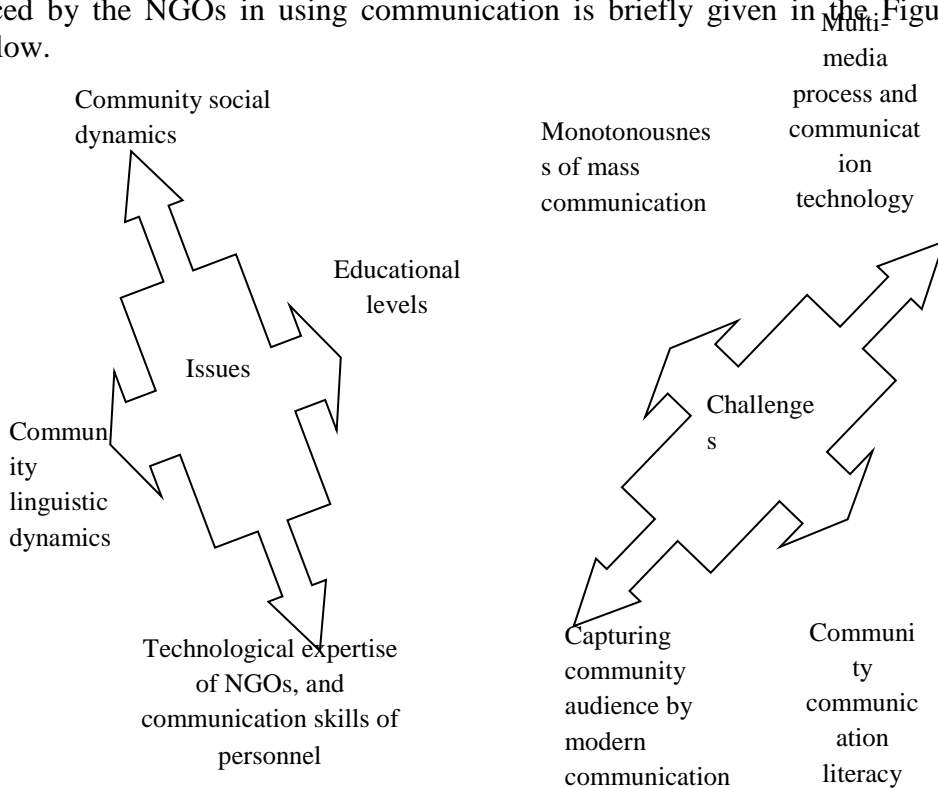


Figure. 4: Issues and challenges in using communication in community development projects

But still, as the main audience of the Sri Lankan NGOs is the rural and urban marginalized communities, the applicability of conventional media remains in the first place in multi-media processes.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

- NGOs in Sri Lanka use communication methods and tools effectively in their community development projects.
- Many of the communication methods and tools used by the national and international NGOs in Sri Lankan community development are successful.
- Majority of the communication strategies used by NGOs in Sri Lanka do not need to be changed.
- The national NGOs are pioneer in using effective communication in their community development projects in comparison to the international Non-Governmental Organizations.
- Communication strategies, methods and tools can be effectively used in all phases including approaching the communities, getting their participation in community development projects, creating trust among the communities, mobilizing the communities etc. in community development work carried out by the NGOs in Sri Lanka.
- It is observed that local and national NGOs do not budget for the planning and implementation the communication strategies, methods and tools in the initial stages of project planning and project formulation.
- The training of the field staffs in using effective communication and awareness creation in use of effective communication is weak in international NGOs in comparison to the national Non-Governmental Organizations.
- The orientation of the Sri Lankan NGOs in using the new media is still not significant while the use of conventional and modern media is appreciable.

## Recommendations

- The NGOs need to adapt a locally identified and appreciated communication methodology by the local communities of concern in their community development projects.
- Before implementing the projects, in the initial stage of the project cycle i.e. formulating the projects, pre-research has to be conducted to identify the appropriate communication strategies and methodologies to improve the effectiveness of the community development projects.
- The inter-personnel communication, group communication, mass communication and 2-step communication models can be further elaborated to adapt effective communication in community development projects.

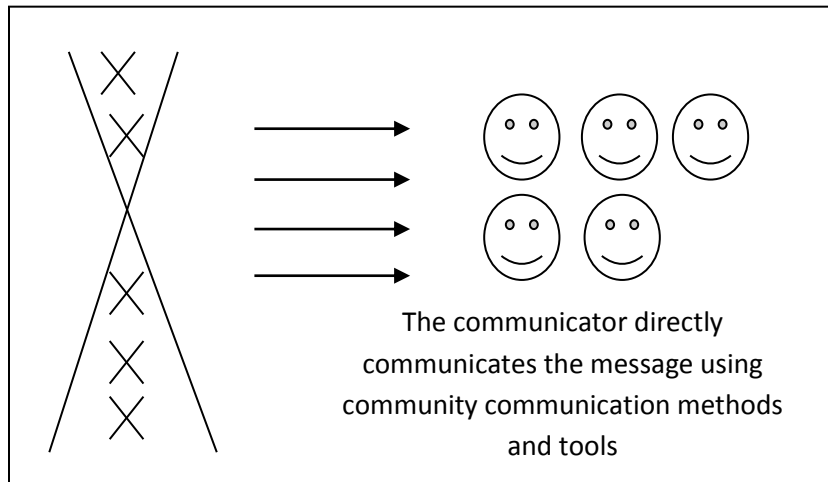


Figure 5: Community-based development communication model (Athugala, 2009, 97 p)

When adapting this communication model the new media and associated social media can be widely used as community communication tools.

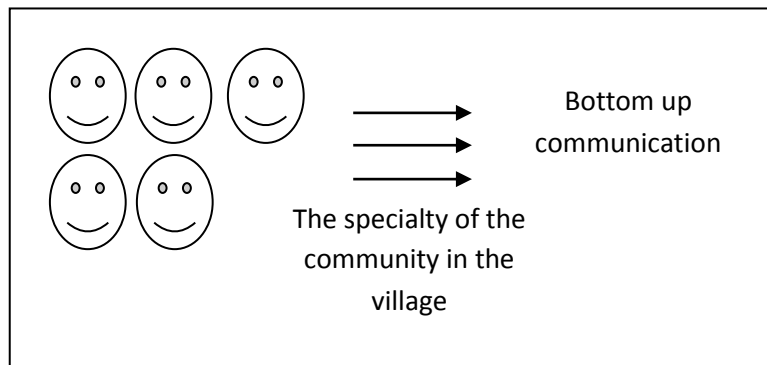


Fig. 6: Village-based development communication model (Athugala, 2009, 97 p)

- The NGOs need to set up development education media units within their organizations to decide on communication strategies to be used in their community development work.
- When the community development projects are implemented in localities, the NGOs need to access the national and local communication streams that are closest to the target audience. This may include the TV channels, radio and printed newspapers.
- The NGOs need to develop a unique communication strategy with each community development project they are working on. This has to be an integral part of the community development project. While doing so they have to refer to the communication pre-research findings with respect to the project of concern.
- The NGOs need to use Internet based new media methodologies more and more. This will enable maintaining effective communication among beneficiaries and other stakeholders of the development, including the State officials and other NGOs and getting their maximum support to reach the project objectives. The ways and means of adapting robust communication methodology and their good practices for specific community development projects can be communicated to other parties through the Internet.

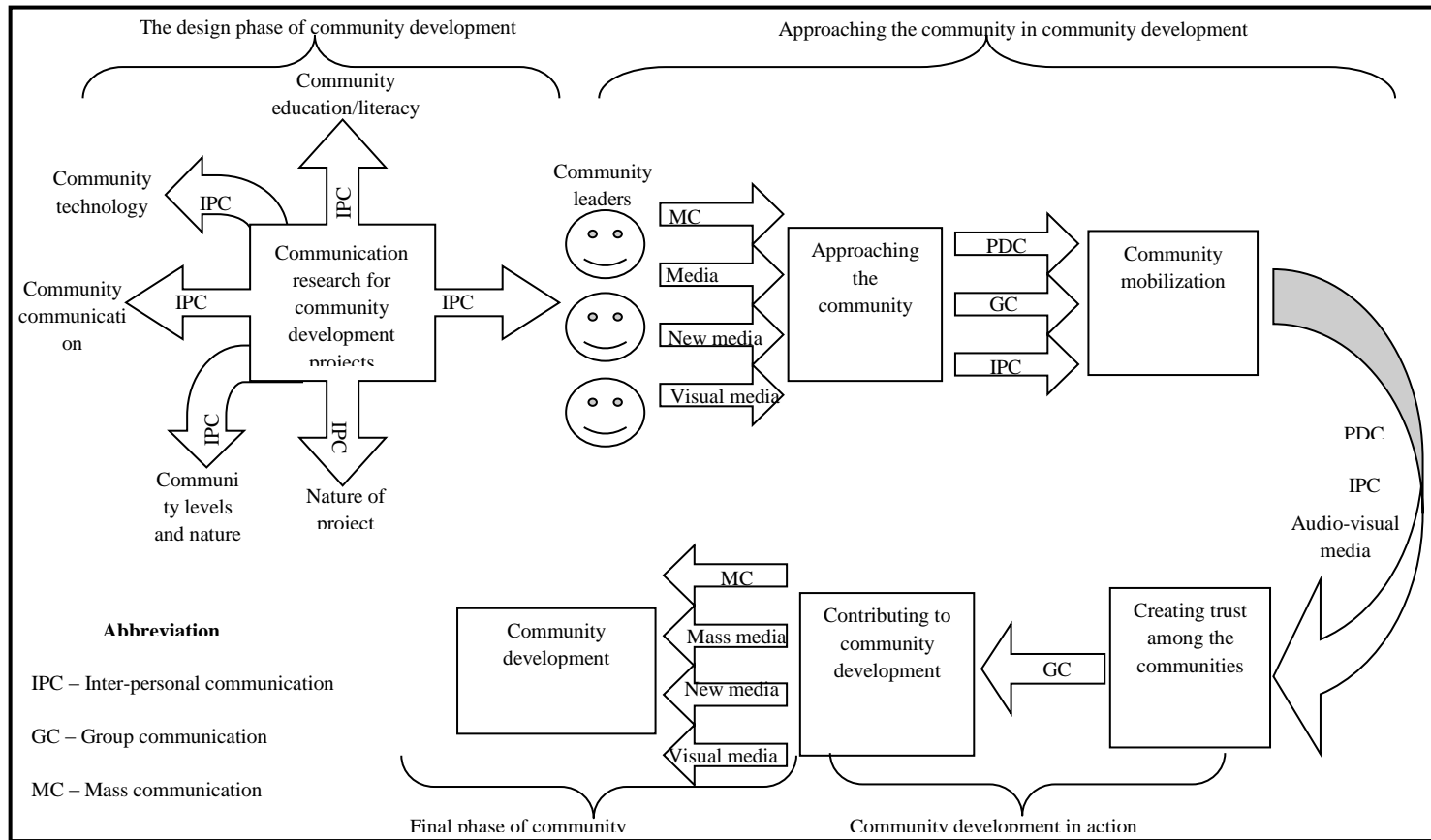


Figure 8: A model communication strategy to be used in community development projects by NGOs

- The NGOs also need to emphasize on the use of modern media streams such as citizen's journalism, public service media etc. in reaching their target audience.
- A model communication approach that can be used in community development projects is given in figure 8. This considers all phases of the project from the design phase to community empowerment.

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