Communicating About Development Results: Not just numbers

DevCom Contribution to the Development Co-operation Report 2017
Data for Development

October 2017

There are important reasons for development agencies to communicate about results. Providers of development co-operation need to build public trust, showing taxpayers that aid is being put to good use. They also need to build public awareness, educating citizens about development and the role of development co-operation.

Since the turn of the century, providers have made considerable progress in communicating about their work. Aid data have become more transparent and increasingly accessible on line. Annual reports to parliament now include impressive numbers, not just on money spent, but also on the outcomes and impact of that spending. More and more information is also available on the activities of private development actors, such as non-governmental organisations and philanthropic foundations. If you are interested in development, you will find interesting data on results.

But what about people who are not interested enough to seek out the facts? Surveys tell us that, despite communication efforts, the general public knows very little about the reality of life in developing countries or about international efforts to promote development.

According to a 2016 Glocalities Report, only 1% of people know that extreme poverty has been cut in half in the past 20 years; 87% of people think it has increased or stayed the same (Lampert and Papadongonas, 2016). In a 2015 survey of 17 traditional and emerging provider countries, 4 out of 10 people thought aid represented 3-10% of their country’s annual budget (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2015). In reality, only five of the countries surveyed spent more than 1% on aid, and only one country – the United Arab Emirates – spent more than 3%.

If donors want the general public to know more about results and have an informed voice in the debate, they need to communicate differently. Drawing on recent discussions in the OECD Development Communication Network (DevCom, oecd.org/dev/devcom), here are five starting points:

---

OECD DevCom promotes Peer Learning for SDG Communicators
dev.com@oecd.org | oecd.org/dev/devcom | sdg-communicator.org
1. **Craft results messages that appeal to both hearts and minds.** Citizens want to hear the real stories behind development. Numbers alone will not resonate with most people.

2. **Choose results messengers to whom people can relate.** Citizens want to hear from the beneficiaries of aid or from passionate field workers, not just politicians, diplomats or celebrities.

3. **Use countries’ own frameworks to find results data and stories.** The most compelling stories come from the programmes and projects that local actors care about.

4. **Build public trust over time by telling it how it is: development is complicated, risky and long term.** Donors need a confident, but humbler, narrative about the role and impact of aid.

5. **Use data to understand your audiences.** Web analytics, public attitudes research and consultations can shed light on how to reach different constituencies. They can also tell communicators whether their work has been effective.

The late Professor Hans Rosling inspired millions of people to engage with development results, delivering tremendous data visualisations with charm, gentle provocation and humour. Data are an essential part of development communications, but narratives and emotions help bring them to life.

By Felix Zimmermann, Co-ordinator, OECD Development Communication Network (DevCom)

---

**Source:** Development Co-operation Report 2017 – Data for Development (OECD)