

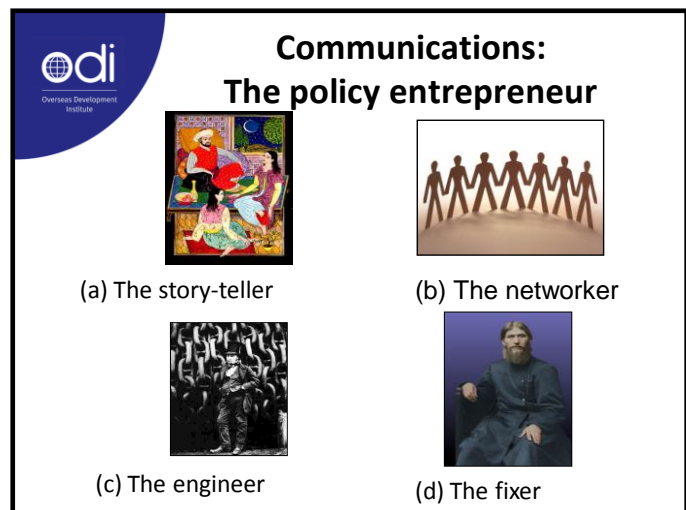
# Informal Network of DAC Development Communicators

## Annual Meeting 2009

1. In a short presentation, I will do four things:
  - i. Draw some connections between the think-tank world and the communications world, around the theme of policy entrepreneurship;
  - ii. Discuss how the development challenge and narrative is changing, post-crisis and in the face of climate change and other new issues;
  - iii. Identify five paradoxes facing communications in that context; and
  - iv. Propose some guiding principles, in the form of a ten point programme.

### *Think-tanks and communicators: a shared agenda*

2. Think-tanks and aid agency communication specialists share many preoccupations. Both are interested in influencing opinions, attitudes and actions. Both must be sensitive to the political process. Both are interested in evidence-based policy-making. Running a think-tank, my passion was to find ways in which research could inspire and inform policy and practice which reduce poverty. We called this 'policy entrepreneurship' and had four role-models: Scheherazade, the story-teller; Paul Revere, the networker; Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the engineer; and Rasputin, the fixer. Working with others, we developed a model we called 'policy-code-sharing'.



3. There is a literature on this. A book I found helpful was 'Made to Stick', by Chip and Dan Heath<sup>1</sup>. They have an acronym, SUCCESS, to describe the key lessons of their approach:

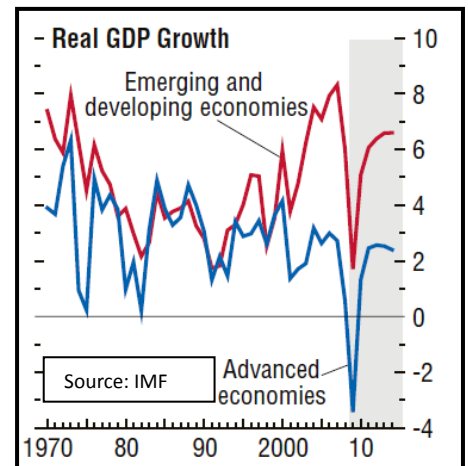
Simple  
Unexpected  
Concrete  
Credible  
Emotional  
Stories

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.madetostick.com/>

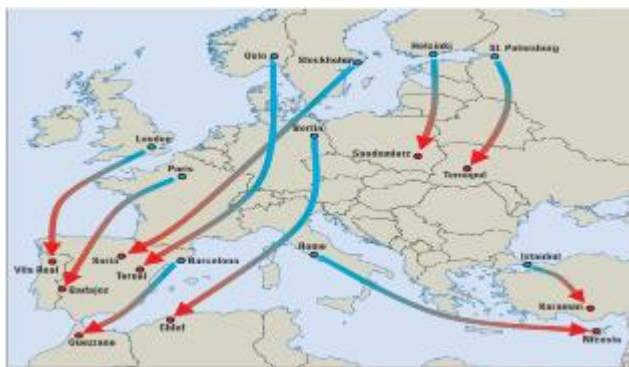
- Some other favourites are ‘Don’t think of an elephant: know your values and frame the debate’ by George Lakoff<sup>2</sup>, ‘One out of ten’ by Peter Hyman<sup>3</sup>, ‘The Spin Doctor’s Diary’ by Lance Price<sup>4</sup>, and ‘Potus Speaks’ by Michael Waldman<sup>5</sup>. What else is worth reading?

*Global challenges – and opportunities*

- The global recession may be beginning to come to an end, but regions and countries will recover at different speeds and unemployment will be a lagging indicator everywhere. The scars caused by factory closures, loss of family assets, lost education, and lost nutrition will be long-lasting. Countries entered into the recession, and will certainly emerge from it, very differently equipped to manage future challenges – whether measured in terms of macroeconomic indicators or readiness to diversify and innovate.



- Meanwhile, new challenges are piling up and there will be other ‘black swans’ we do not yet know about. Climate change is the biggest. As Nick Stern has observed: ‘the risk consequences of ignoring climate change will be very much bigger than the consequences of ignoring risks in the financial system’. The new World Development Report estimates that



\$400bn a year will need to be transferred to developing countries by 2030, a figure equivalent to over 50% of the current GNP of low income countries. Huge transformations will need to take place in both rich and poor countries. The figure shows where the places are now

that European capitals may resemble in 2050.

- Other challenges include: demographic change, with a ‘demographic gift’ for some countries but unmanageable population growth for others; urbanisation, with over 90 per cent of the additional 3 billion people in the world by 2050 expected to be located in towns in poor countries; and resource stress independent of climate change, including water. Global risk analysis also usually points to pandemics and the destabilising spill-over from fragile states.

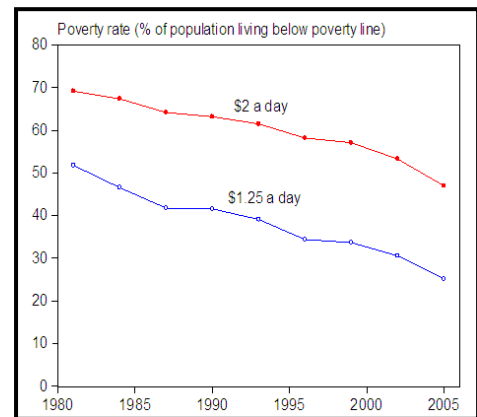
<sup>2</sup> See [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> See [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> See [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> See [here](#).

8. The future also offers opportunities, however, to secure long-term gains with respect to poverty reduction and the social indicators of the Millennium Development Goals. The number of low income countries is expected to fall by a third by 2015, and the number of people in those countries by half. China and India are both now classified as middle income. Technological innovation will contribute to better health, faster communication, and new sources of employment. Who could have imagined the impact of the internet, for example?



*Matching policy response to need*

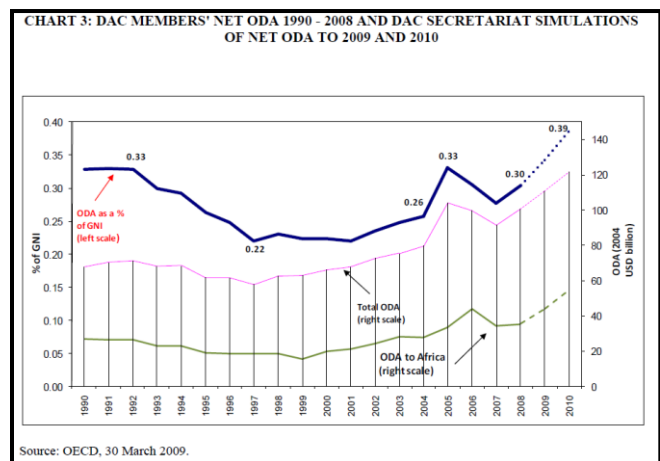
9. The financial crisis has triggered an active policy debate, for example between 'freshwater' and 'seawater' economists in the US, or between orthodox and heterodox economists in the World Bank and the UN. The Stiglitz Report to the President of the General Assembly and the work of UNCTAD provide a distinctive analysis of the current crisis, more critical of market-based solutions. Many environmental campaigners are highly critical of growth-based strategies.
10. Three propositions might be put forward as lessons from the crisis, though these turn out to be controversial in some countries.
11. First, the crisis demonstrated the important role of the state, in acting as guarantor of financial markets, but also in providing the fiscal stimulus necessary to combat recession.
12. Second, the crisis has underlined the importance of public expenditure, providing safety nets, but also equipping countries to meet future challenges. Recent reviews have pointed to the need for Governments to invest in such areas as: strengthening social protection; protecting public services; investing in research and development; investing in education and training; building the infrastructure needed for urbanisation and adaptation to climate change; and supporting key productive sectors, including agriculture.
13. Third, the crisis has pointed to the imperative of collective action in dealing with global challenges, raising many questions about the effectiveness of existing institutions, the role of new formations like the G-20, and general issues about representation and accountability. The mood of the moment is multilateral.

*Re-thinking international development policy*

14. Many donors have begun to re-think development policy in response to the crisis. The MDGs remain an over-arching objective, though one increasingly difficult to reach.

15. On the negative side, some donors have found it necessary to cut aid. Others have been able to confirm Gleneagles or EU pledges to increase aid. The latest DAC figures show aid increasing, though projections are still short of Gleneagles targets.

16. The aid picture is complicated, however. In nearly all countries, there have been debates about the relationship between development funding and climate funding, and about the link between development and foreign policy funding.



17. More generally, development ministers have been concerned with maintaining public support for development cooperation during the recession, sometimes telling a new or updated 'story' about inter-dependence and common interest.

18. Independently of the size of aid budgets, will the crisis and the scale of future challenge have any impact of what aid is spent on or how it is spent? And what institutional changes are needed to deliver revised programmes?

19. The crisis has underlined the importance of non-aid issues, including regulation of financial markets, trade and climate regimes, and other aspects of what the EU calls 'policy coherence for development'. Donors are increasingly focused on whole of government approaches, linking the work of development agencies to trade, climate, foreign policy and defence ministries.

20. New thinking plays out on many current issues: climate change, of course; the continuing food crisis; aid effectiveness; Afghanistan; many others.

#### *Communication dilemmas*

21. Think tanks and communication departments face difficult dilemmas. Here is an initial list of 'communication paradoxes':

- i. The complexity paradox.
- ii. The altruism paradox.
- iii. The attachment paradox.
- iv. The pooling paradox.
- v. The paradox of ambition.

22. The complexity paradox says that the simple stories needed for communication can obscure real world complexity. Make Poverty History, itself a brilliant slogan, with an objective, a doing word and a timeline, had three themes, viz debt, aid and trade. It was often difficult

for journalists to go deeper. The MDGs (see the paradox of ambition) worked as a political project partly because they provided a vehicle for human stories and personal involvement: think Comic Relief, or Sarah Brown on maternal mortality. How can more complex stories be communicated, about debt, aid and trade, about the MDGs, but also about e.g. the complex politics of Afghanistan and other fragile states?

23. The altruism paradox says that compassion may be most at risk just when it is most needed. This is the challenge facing development ministers in 2009-10, trying to protect overseas spending when local services are at risk of being cut. Polls usually show that support for development is wide but shallow. The latest Eurobarometer survey does not support the idea that the European public overall is turning away from aid, but does suggest that 'those least likely to come under pressure because of globalisation . . . are the most supportive of development assistance'. It will be important to continue tracking public opinion as public expenditure cuts begin to bite.
24. The attachment paradox says that public support for development depends on links and relationships, but these may cause mis-direction of resources. A good example is aid from the UK to India, now a middle income country and therefore on a trajectory to ineligibility for aid, but at the same time a country with strong links to the UK, including but not only among the population of Indian origin. The Pakistan earthquake demonstrated similar links. The tsunami led to a hugely greater response than many other crises, with a bias in spending to countries people knew (Thailand, Sri Lanka).
25. The pooling paradox says that multilateral action and donor pooling (e.g. budget support) may be efficient, but that the public likes to see a flag and also direct results in return for their tax spend. Actually, public opinion surveys often suggest that Government to Government aid is often viewed with suspicion (perceived inefficiency on the donor side, perceived corruption on the recipient side), but there is a strong attachment to NGOs. Some UN agencies (UNICEF?) are exempt from the suspicion of official aid agencies. In general, the public likes to see a direct line of causality and accountability between the spending of their tax money and e.g. lower infant mortality. How can this be done when donors are encouraged by the Paris/Accra principles to pool money, and when lines of causality are inevitably long and usually obscure?
26. The paradox of ambition says that unachievable targets may be necessary to fire up public enthusiasm. The MDGs have proved to be highly successful as a political and mobilising strategy, despite many problems with scope and coverage, and a level of ambition that was always likely to leave Ministers exposed as the deadline approached. They are not especially useful in operational terms, either. The former DFID Chief Economist, Prof Adrian Wood, used to say that 'we should take the MDGs seriously but not literally'. Is there a better way of managing public expectations and simultaneously delivering better performance?

*Some guiding principles*

27. This is work in progress.

- i. Take people on a journey, from simple images and stories to more complex understanding: 'move up the value chain'.
- ii. Construct a narrative which is about both altruism and self interest: development as social justice, but also as necessary for our own well-being.
- iii. Don't just talk about risks, but also about opportunities. Be optimistic (cf Martin Luther King: 'I have a dream', not 'I have a nightmare')
- iv. Emphasise 'whole of Government' approaches, not just aid.
- v. Tell the story that the 'multilaterals are us'. Individual bilateral agencies don't have to be everywhere.
- vi. Recognise that choices have to be made and decisions taken – don't hide from them.
- vii. Principled decision-making needs principles – spell them out (e.g. global social justice).
- viii. Win the argument on what the problem is before trying to win the argument on solutions (e.g. climate change) (Matthew Taylor)
- ix. Set realistic targets and use them pragmatically: 'what are we going to do on Monday morning?'
- x. Make sure leadership comes from the top on all the above. Ministers' speeches are a powerful vehicle.

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Simon Maxwell

November 2009