Communicating for Successful Partnership

At a workshop in June 2009, members of the Health and Business Roundtable Indonesia (HBRI) shared observations on the role of communication in partnerships. Participants discussed who to communicate with for successful partnerships, what to consider in communicating with these target audiences, and how to communicate with them, The group had been asked to share experiences communicating with four target audiences: (1) partners; (2) colleagues within their own organizations who need to support the partnership; (3) beneficiaries of partnerships, e.g., communities and workers; and (4) the public. However, because communicating with government was determined by the group to be so critical for the success of most partnerships, government was identified as a fifth target audience.

COMMUNICATING WITH PARTNERS

- When considering a potential partner, learn as much as possible about the organization's preferences, values, limitations, structure, and what it does.

- Don't make assumptions about a potential partner based on stereotypes or previous experiences. An assumption among NGOs that gets in the way of starting projects with companies is that all multinational companies are the same. Similarly, it is important to understand that there are differences among NGOs: international vs. local, service vs. research.

- Find common language. Technical language may be good in some cases but not all.

- Be clear about values, interests, expectations and procedures; roles and responsibilities and what each understands "partnership" to mean. Members have experienced failure when a relationship thought to be a partnership was in fact a subcontract relationship. The two relationships bring different expectations on how parties will work together.

- A facilitator is often needed to bring parties from different sectors together at the beginning to help potential partners work together to design the partnership. An effective facilitator will have the experience and knowledge to be credible and trusted by potential partners to help them build the respect needed to work together.

COMMUNICATING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

- It is critical that those throughout an organization support the partnership, especially those that will affect its implementation. Decisions may be made at one level, but implemented at another. For example, a partnership may be supported by those at the headquarters of a multinational organization, but not necessarily at the country or local level where resources may not be available to implement or there is insufficient commitment for other reasons.

- Need a spirit of investment – not just the investment.

- Email and phone communication can improve communication in organizations with different levels in different locations such as companies and/or NGOs that have international headquarters in countries other than where the partnership is implemented.

COMMUNICATING WITH BENEFICIARIES: COMMUNITIES AND WORKERS

- Begin communicating with beneficiaries early. One way to do this with communities is to create technical working groups involving communities and partner organizations so communities are involved in decision-making throughout the partnership. This includes its design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and assessment of results.

COMMUNICATING WITH BENEFICIARIES: COMMUNITIES AND WORKERS *(Continued)*

- Start with workers' and communities' perceptions of their needs. A problem of many development projects is that they are "opportunity driven" and not driven by communities perceptions of their needs.

- Find an entry point that is familiar to community members to initiate discussions.

- Don't raise false expectations within communities. If they are expected to contribute to the partnership, make it clear from the beginning how they are expected to contribute. The experiences of some communities have created expectations for money whenever outsiders are involved. In some cases community members have come to expect to be paid to sit in meetings.

- Use a local field officer who understands local values and culture and can talk to communities. Often Jakarta-based organizations talk to government officials on behalf of communities, but local interests and needs are left out.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

- Communicate with the public through government ministries.

COMMUNICATING WITH GOVERNMENT

- Government involvement encourages sustainability. Work with the community to develop their ability to advocate for continued government support beyond the life of the specific project. At some point, you will go away – the community and government will stay.

- There are no or few mechanisms between formal agreements with government (Memorandum of Understanding or MOU) and those needed to work at local levels.

- A challenge of working with government ministries is that agreements are often negotiated at one level, but the project gets implemented at another.

COMMUNICATING WITH GOVERNMENT *(Continued)*

- It is easier to engage the government at the decentralized level. Meetings are not bound by office hours, they are less formal, and it is easier to bring government officials and communities together.

- One model developed to overcome the problem at the national level is to bring people from Jakarta to see how partnerships work at the decentralized level.

- Demonstrating by example has been very effective with government. Encourage exchanges within government about past experiences to encourage replication.

- Need someone with expertise working with government to assist in communicating with the government.

- Recognize that governments often see NGOs as trouble makers and corporations as only out for profit.

- It is important to demonstrate to government representative(s) that partnerships bring value to their work

COMMUNICATION WITH ALL TARGET AUDIENCES

- Many observations were relevant to all target audiences including:

- Personalities matter, individuals matter, everything is personal.

- It is all about respect.

- Understand and respect cultural differences that affect communication. In Indonesia the degree to which "yes" means "yes" can differ across cultures.