

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY AND METHODS USED IN MVF

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Research Objective

- To understand the forms of communication used by MVF, in the context of existing communication theories.
- To examine the flow of communication and the communication channels employed.
- To analyse the relevance of the 'Opinion Leader Model' of communication

Methodology used

This is mainly a qualitative study of the communication strategy that is already in place. Semi-structured interviews with a random sample of volunteers and the stakeholders themselves, have been used.

Organisation Narrative

M V Foundation, based in Andhra Pradesh, has been working for almost two decades now, to tackle child labour and illiteracy. Its greatest contribution has been to negate the 'poverty argument' – as it has demonstrated in its work, child labour is not just due to economic reasons but also largely due to the social attitudes, and so these attitudes need to be changed if child labour is to be eradicated. This programme is being implemented in more than 6,000 villages, covering 137 mandals, in eleven districts of Andhra Pradesh. Over the years, MVF has brought over 4,00,000 child labourers and bonded labourers to school. In the process, it has made entire communities conscious of child rights. As a result of this intervention, over a 1000 villages in the Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh are free of child labour, and many more villages are poised to achieve this goal.

The MVF intervention may be understood as a two-pronged approach that aims–

- ❖ To bring the children into schools and keep them there, and
- ❖ To build consensus in the community that each child should be educated.

The goal here is ensuring education for all children, resulting in both empowerment and increased capacity of the community as a whole.

THE NON-NEGOTIABLES

- ***All children must attend full time formal day schools*** (not night schools or non-formal education centres.)
- ***Any child out of school is a child labourer*** (whether waged, non-waged, in factory, fields or home)
- ***All work/labour is hazardous: it harms the overall growth and development of the child.***
- ***There must be a total abolition of child labour*** (any law regulating child work is unacceptable).
- ***Any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned*** (e.g. arguments about the “harsh reality” of poverty, the necessity of children’s earnings, poor quality of teachers or schools... these are all anti-children)

1. Introduction

Communication is a defining human characteristic and a central element in the functioning of all societies. It is also an effective tool for social change since it is present at all levels of human experience and is critical to understanding human behaviour. Communication plays an important role in changing social/cultural attitudes and power structures in the community. As such, it forms an integral part of any development initiative.

Communication strategies, quite obviously, are based on the outcome they are expected to give. The main function of the communication activity in MVF is to inform, motivate and mobilise. As such, the volunteers mostly use linear models¹ of communication. The tone is, however, never patronizing; at all stages and levels of the intervention one can observe horizontal communication, and a symbiotic relationship between the volunteers and the members of the community.

MVF first organises rallies, debates and discussions, public meetings and uses cultural activities like songs and street theatre to make the community conscious of child rights and related concerns.

The next step is to motivate the child and the parents. The volunteers first find out if the child wishes to study. If the child expresses willingness, the volunteers begin speaking to the parents, first directly and then, if they prove difficult, through the opinion leaders of the community. If the child herself/himself shows no inclination to study, s/he is motivated

¹ Linear models of communication, as the name suggests, assume that communication travels in a linear manner, from a sender to a receiver, through some channel. An oft-quoted example of this model is Shannon and Weaver's Mathematical model, proposed in 1948. These models are now considered too simplistic and are largely obsolete.

through village camps (three months long) and visits to the RBCs. These children are then either sent to Residential Bridge Camps (RBCs) or to government schools and all efforts are made to keep them there.

2. Levels of Communication²

The communication is mainly at the mass, group and interpersonal levels. At the mass level of communication, it is the non-mediated forms that have a greater impact. This is not to say that mass media are not used; in fact they play an important role in the communication strategy adopted by MVF.

2.1 Mass Communication³

Mass communication is generally associated with the mass media; however, there are other forms too. Mass communication simply means that the sender is communicating with a large number of receivers; as such, it may be mediated or non-mediated.

2.1.1 Non-mediated forms of mass communication:

The non-mediated forms of mass communication include interpersonal mass communication and group mass communication.

² 'Levels of communication' is a method used to group communication in society based on the number and characteristics of the receivers involved. The levels range from intrapersonal, where the sender and the receiver are the same person (ex: the thought process of an individual) to mass level, where there are countless individual receivers who constitute a mass together.

³ Mass Communication in this paper is based on the typology proposed by Klopff and McCroskey in 'The Process and Effects of Mass Communication'

- ***Interpersonal mass communication*** – In this form of communication, the source speaks directly with each member of a group. These receivers, taken together, form the mass.

This is the ideal form of mass communication since the speaker can reach everybody and establish personal contact with the many receivers.

Examples of communication used by MVF at the interpersonal mass level are –

1. Surveys –In the first step of the intervention, the volunteers conduct door-to-door surveys to gather information about the households of the village. This information is then used to prepare a ‘social mapping’ of the village, which is used in discussions to highlight the problems prevalent in that community. The survey also provides an opportunity for the volunteers to make contacts, identify the sympathisers of the cause and to introduce the issue to the people of the village.
2. Door-to-door interaction – This follows the survey format except that the purpose here is not to gather information, but to give information that will aid in motivating the household to send the children to school. This is a continuous process; the volunteers keep visiting and re-visiting the household till the end is achieved. This is also an ideal follow-up tool and is extensively used to further bolster the effect of activities like rallies, public meetings and street theatre and to monitor the child’s attendance at school.

3. Motivation camps – These are short-term camps, three months in duration, held for a few hours everyday. The purpose of this camp is to counsel those children who are not willing to go to school. Motivation camps help in easing such children into the study routine; it is observed that most children end up spending increasing amounts of time at the motivation camps, rather than at work.

- ***Group mass communication***

Interpersonal mass communication, while ideal, may sometimes be hard to implement. At such times, it is easier to gather the group together and speak to them at the same time. This form of communication is also called ‘public communication’.

Channels used at this level include activities like rallies, *padayatras*, public meetings and folk media like songs and street theatre. The folk media are observed to be especially influential; most volunteers agree that the staging of a street play is often the turning point in their efforts. The audience becomes curious about the issue being spoken about and seeks more information about it; in general, one may observe that the receptivity of the audience increases.

Folk Media – These include songs, street theatre, traditional music and dance performances etc. The folk media are very close to people at the local level, as they are indigenous art forms that have been popular for centuries. They are, furthermore, present in areas where mass media has not been fully or effectively developed. Also,

folk media are personal forms of entertainment and communication. This is important because behavioural changes are most easily brought about by personal interaction.

Folk media can easily capture the attention of the viewers, since they are familiar forms of communication. Also, these media are far more effective than other conventional media, given that the folk media use local dialects to tackle local issues in a manner that is pertinent to local sensibilities.

Dramas, songs and rallies are by far the most effective tools used, according to the volunteers. They bring about a lot of awareness and change in the community. In the early days of the intervention, the volunteers used to rely mainly on interpersonal communication but they themselves felt that what they were saying was not too effective, so they began to use the folk media – first folk songs and later street theatre.

Folk songs: These are used to mobilise the people. Written by the MVF volunteers themselves, these songs are set to the tunes of the more popular traditional folk songs. These are taught at the bridge camps too. These folk songs are much more influential than mere words and speeches could ever hope to be, as this reporter observed at the recent Alumni meet.

Street Theatre: The villages in Telangana have a long history of theatre. Dramas called *Bhagavathalu*, especially, are very popular. So, the plays staged by MVF are in the same format and draw upon Telangana culture extensively. The songs in the play are set to the same tunes as the *Bhagavatham* songs, making them very familiar and attractive to the villagers.

These plays have a great impact on the people – it was observed that immediately after a staging, close to fifty children would come to the Residential Bridge Camps (RBCs), almost double the number of children who would have been motivated by the volunteers. These fifty children would be brought either by the volunteers or their parents; some of them would run away from home and come to the camp. Also, the volunteers say that for weeks following the staging, snatches of the songs would be heard all over the village and one could find children enacting scenes of the play. As the volunteers put it – ‘Mobilisation becomes very easy after this.’

Some of the plays that have been staged by the M V Foundation’s volunteers in various villages across Andhra Pradesh are -

- a. *Bhoomi thalli biddalam* (Subject: Ill-effects of bonded labour)
- b. *Pellikenduku tondara* (Subject: Opposing child marriage)
- c. *Padandi badiki* (Subject: Against cotton farming)
- d. *Palle suddulu* (Subject: Health)

Of these, the first one, ‘*Bhoomi thalli biddalam*’, has been the most influential. This play sought to convince the three stakeholders – employers, parents and children – of the importance of education. The hour-and-a-half long play has been instrumental in getting countless children to school, and has contributed greatly to increasing the awareness of the stakeholders about the issue.

2.1.2 Mediated mass communication:

The advantage of using the mass media is the enormous reach they enjoy. They are generally used to increase awareness, give the facts and increase the popularity of the message.

Posters, newspapers and television are the mass media generally used in the following manner –

- i. Posters are often used to increase people's awareness and to get them to start debating the issue in question.
- ii. The press is invited to every Mandal and District level meeting for publicity.
- iii. Television, too, is used to spread the message – recent examples include TV9's campaign on children, and TV9's and NTV's reports on the Labour Department's raids on shops where children were employed.

Reporting of the activities in the press or on television serves another purpose – the supporters feel honoured to be mentioned in the media, and this often inspires others to start supporting MVF, and the people who have been opposing the intervention are embarrassed by the coverage they get and so cease to fight the volunteers.

MVF also uses the folk channel of '*dindora*' or public announcements to give important messages on schedules, dates and locations to gather people for the meetings and discussions.

2.2 Group Communication

Group communication is said to exist among three or more people with a common purpose.

Group communication is very similar to interpersonal communication. It is also personal, direct and interactive, but to a much lesser degree. These qualities decrease with the increase in the size of the group.

The purpose of communication at this level is basically to raise awareness of the issue in the village. A larger section of the community can be addressed at a time, and all their doubts and questions can be dealt with. Another important function of group communication is to arrive at consensus.

Group discussions and debates are the major channels used here

Group discussions – The volunteers arrange for meetings with the stakeholders, the children, parents and the employers.

These meetings address concerns such as:

‘Why should the children study?’

‘How will we manage if the children don’t work?’

‘What is the advantage of studying?’

2.3 Interpersonal Communication:

This is communication between a limited number of participants - usually two - in close proximity to each other. It is personal, direct and intimate, and allows for maximum sharing of ideas and experiences. Also, the feedback received is immediate. Interpersonal

communication involves face-to-face communication in a way that accomplishes the purpose and is appropriate.

The quality of interpersonal communication is highly dependent on the relationship between the participants and the socio-cultural norms governing the situation in which the communication takes place.

Interpersonal communication is especially useful to gain or convey information, to establish one's identity and to satisfy such needs as inclusion, control and affection.

Most communication between the MVF volunteers and the stakeholders is at the interpersonal level. This is helpful in establishing and furthering contact with the community.

One-on-one discussion with the various stakeholders (children, parents, employers, village elders) is the major channel of communication used at this level. Such a channel is useful in motivating and persuading people, changing behaviour and attitudes, and in reinforcing changed behaviour. It also has the advantage of flexibility - the communication can be easily modified according to the situation and the individual needs. The interpersonal element forms an important part of all communication strategies adopted by the volunteers.

The volunteers also use opinion leaders⁴ for communication. This is another channel of communication available at this level. Here the flow of communication is not direct. The opinion leaders form intermediaries of the communication process.

⁴ The opinion leader is an active media user or receiver, who interprets the meaning of the messages for the other users. S/he is also instrumental in altering people's attitudes towards the communication. Typically the opinion leader is held in high esteem by those that accept his or her opinions.

3. The Opinion Leader Model⁵

According to this model, information flows in two distinct stages. In the first stage, individuals called opinion leaders receive the message. In the second stage, these opinion leaders pass on this information to others. This model is called the Two-Step flow of communication. A second, similar model, called the Two-Cycle, Two-Step flow of communication, also exists. Here, both the opinion leaders and his/her followers are exposed to the message at the same time, and the opinion leaders reinforce the message later. The 'personal influence' of the opinion leader plays a major role in getting people to accept the message. Interaction between opinion leaders and their followers produces a recognisable change in attitude and behaviour.

Recognising the important role that the opinion leaders play in the community, MVF actively tries to gain their support. The village elders are the focal points of the community; therefore, their support makes the work of the volunteers much easier. If they are not involved, the campaign takes a longer time.

Identification of the opinion leaders is the first and the simplest step. Since the volunteers go to the village regularly, they know who is influential in that village. Also, the volunteer from that village helps in identifying them. Opinion leaders are generally the village elders, Sarpanch and other Gram Panchayat members, and teachers. From this one can understand that the parameters for deciding who could be the possible opinion leaders are – intelligence, wealth and goodwill.

⁵ This model was proposed by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, in relation to the consumption of mass media content. Unlike previous works in this arena, this model stresses the importance of human agency in the process of mass communication. These ideas are also used to understand communication at other levels, especially interpersonal level, as in this paper.

The opinion leaders so identified are not always supportive of the cause, especially when they are employers themselves. In such cases, the volunteers have to first convince them. These opinion leaders must be addressed individually; group interaction does not yield any efforts. Volunteers also use the opinion leaders' contacts to persuade them. Another strategy is to honour the elders who speak up for child rights or persuade children to go to school, at the village meetings. Pleased by honour, the elders begin to take the intervention much more seriously and become leaders of this campaign. They then help the volunteers in any way possible, including accompanying them on door-to-door campaigns.

To ensure that these leaders are created, the volunteers have to be very perseverant. A case in point is that of Lakshma Reddy (Kondakal Village, Shankerpalli Mandal). Once a strong opponent of the MVF intervention, Mr. Reddy is now a key opinion leader of not only the village, but also the mandal. This transformation required the untiring efforts of the volunteers; upset with the prospect of losing his worker and his money, he even roughed up a few of them. However, after continuous motivation, he has become an asset to the campaign.

It is observed that if one elder joins, the rest automatically step in. This participation of the elders is very beneficial as it enhances the trustworthiness of the campaign in the eyes of the villagers. Although there is no overnight change, the villagers become more receptive. Once these leaders involve themselves in the campaign, everything else falls into place.

4. Conclusion

MVF's communication strategy thus addresses the needs and concerns of all the stakeholders. It is a clever mix of conventional and folk media, designed to reach out to people across different levels, for maximum impact. The volunteers, although untrained, are effective communicators, simply because of the conviction they have in the cause. The end, ultimately, is to build community consensus on the issue and to bring about sustainable change in the community. It is largely due to the successful communication strategy that MVF's work has not just resulted in children being sent to school but has also developed an awareness of rights and responsibilities, and has broken through long-existing barriers of class and caste.