CHAPTER 6:

International Perspectives: Communicating in a Democracy

6.1 INTRODUCTION

International communication trends in the latter quarter of the 20th Century have been influenced by a number of profound changes in the way governments interact with the population. These trends have been triggered by:

- the human rights debate - the principle that freedom of information and expression are necessary human rights;

- opportunities and global shrinkage created by the dramatic development of information and communication technology;

- a recognition of the role of information as an agent of empowerment;

- a growing consensus that governments should become more streamlined and cost-effective and that civil services should become smaller and more professional;

- The principle that "Government should do what government does best".

- a shift in the attitude of the press which became less reverent of the institutions of society and therefore less "useful" to governments;

- a critical focus on the controlling influence of whoever prepares the message and the visual and verbal language used to convey it.

6.2 INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICE

In view of the lack of a tradition of open government in South Africa, the Task Group made the identification of best practice in communications within the international community a priority. With financial support and advice from the United Nations and Commonwealth, the Group broke into teams of two or three and visited a wide range of countries. The policies and practices of 19 countries and four inter-governmental organisations were examined.[31]

The Task Group believes this experience provided a very important template of ideas and practices to discuss South African solutions. The following is a distillation of the main lessons learned.

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31   The countries were: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Britain, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Ghana, Hungary, India, Israel, Malaysia, Senegal, Singapore, Tanzania, and the United States; and the Task Group consulted with the Commonwealth Secretariat, European Union, Organisation of African Unity, and United Nations. See Annexure 4, a compilation of reports on international investigations.

6.3 MEDIA RELATIONS - INTERNATIONAL RECIPES FOR SUCCESS

In the countries visited, government gave very high priority to the organisation and conduct of their relations with the media. We noted the following key components of the systems we examined:

- The direct involvement of ministers on a daily basis (for example in Britain, any Cabinet Minister making an announcement attends the daily Cabinet Committee on the co-ordination and Presentation of Government Policy, which is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. In Germany a minister always briefs the press after a Cabinet meeting).

- A regular co-ordination system led by a chief spokesperson in the Presidency/Prime Minister's Office.

- Individual Ministers are accountable to an overall strategy (for example daily teleconferences between the White House and key ministries, regular consultations between government information officers).

- A well-defined system of access to the press (for example the weekly Cabinet debriefing held in Australia, Czech Republic, Senegal and Germany). In Singapore the PM and press secretary have regular press luncheons. Such sessions provide an opportunity for proper motivation of government decisions with full background materials.

- Communication officers are always senior professionals and have full access to the decision-making process. Frequently, government services have either a specialised media stream with its own career path, or provide for ministers to second special advisers from the media on contract (for example Egypt and US).

- Speed - government must have the resources to get its message out immediately.

- There is great emphasis on the importance of communication. Key concepts are professionalism, access to and involvement of, ministers and a high level co-ordination from the centre.

6.4 DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATIONS - INFORMING CITIZENS AND CREATING A CULTURE OF ACCESS.

Electronic media is the most powerful way for government to communicate with citizens. In many larger developing countries such as Brazil, Egypt, Malaysia and India, access to TV is significantly higher (90% or higher) than South Africa (best estimated at 45%). In most developing countries visited, however, the government has had to address the problems of illiteracy and inadequate access to information for poorer and rural communities through active programmes of information provision through centres or mobile information units.

TV and radio, in that order, remain the media of choice for governments in developed and developing countries alike. Particularly in developing countries, the messages are not always delivered directly, but use more popular methods - such as TV "soaps", cultural performances, use of sport and cultural personalities - to get across messages in areas such a health, population and farming methods.

"Slots" or spaces for formal communication from government to the population are not uncommon. The head of government is normally accorded the right to address the nation

when he/she considers it necessary, and the broadcaster is responsible for ensuring that adequate right of reply or comment is accorded to the elected opposition. The US President has a regular 15 minutes slot on national public radio. In Brazil all radio stations are required to broadcast a one-hour programme called the Voice of Brazil each evening. In the Czech Republic, the Prime Minister answers questions for five minutes each week on the private TV channel. In Senegal and Tanzania all political parties are given regular slots on TV and radio. Overall, we found that formal communications from government in this format lacked public interest.

Radio is a crucial vehicle for development information and is used in many countries to reach remote or disadvantaged communities. Community radio is highly effective and is supported financially in many countries, from the richest to the poorest. Second, technology has the capacity to help developing countries to reduce the high cost of getting information to the poorest communities by making it more accessible and cheaper to deliver. In Egypt, for example, local information centres are served from a central agency and have impressive data bases. In Senegal, video units travel the country to bring materials to rural communities.

6.5 DELIVERING GOVERNMENT INFORMATION-MINIMUM CENTRAL CAPACITIES

Most governments have a central information or service provision agency. Increasingly, these bodies are not spokespersons but ensure good standards and centralise the analytical capacity. They are mainly "service providers" of:

- corporate buying of advertising space for government - to reduce cost and improve impact of information campaigns;

- training and development - offering support for the development of the use of new technologies for other government users/communicators;

- research and analysis - from providing a clipping/transcript service to supervising research on public attitudes (opinion polls) and tracking media stories;

- maintenance of a corporate identity for government - through standardising imaging;

- core data - providing or co-ordinating the provision of basic data on the country and ensuring accessibility, for example maintaining a Homepage on the Internet;

- publishing, editing and strategic planning services to other "consumers" (departments/parastatals) in government;

- in developing countries, providing press accreditation and support services to the media;

- visiting services - arranging programmes for foreign visitors.

In line with the current trend in developments in international public service practice, the tendency is for the central agency to outsource (sub-contract) the production and supply of many required services to the private sector.

6.6 CONCLUSIONS

The trend is for central government communications structures to become streamlined and exist, not in a controlling but in a co-ordinating capacity. In this model, the structure consists of a few people whose main responsibility is to strategise around policy and appropriate messages.

In tune with strengthened notions of accountability of government to the electorate, this core group tends to be in direct and constant touch with top management - such as Cabinet and senior politicians and is usually located in the officer of the President, Prime Minister, and so on.

The core group consists of the chief communicator in the head of government's office, together with chief communicators from the ministries. In this way, co-ordination of government messages is achieved.

The emphasis is on professionalism. Top communicators enjoy comparatively high status and rank. In some cases they may be political appointees of the various ministers and in others they may be civil servants.

The trend is away from duplication of services offered by civil society, and a separate department of information arm of government which maintains extensive production facilities and tries to duplicate professional services offered by the private sector. "Government should do what government can do best".
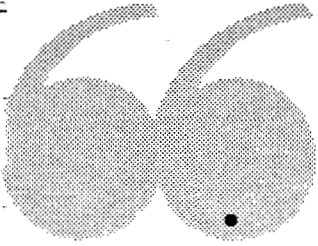
Thus implementation is generally outsourced. Actual production work is contracted out with skills bought from the various professional services available through the private sector. (Advertising agencies, public relations, video, research, and so on).

Substantial cost savings are effected through bulk buying of services such as advertising and research. In the UK, the Central Office of Information (COI) acts as buying agent for the government. In 1994-95 a saving of 30,8% was achieved.

6.7 GENERAL TRENDS

In conclusion, a number of definite trends are identifiable within public sector development in both developed and developing countries:

- Concomitant with the concept of a central co-ordinating structure is the notion of implementation at local level. Thus decentralised and diverse methods of providing information and government messages are devised.

- Community media lobbies are well developed in a number of countries and are usually given recognition and support.

- Radio has been identified as a cheap and effective way for communities to communicate and is often subsidised in some way by the state.

- Information technology is increasingly playing a role in empowering communities in better resourced countries.

- The distribution of government information to communities, particularly in remote areas, has become a preoccupation of governments. Often this trend has manifested itself in what have been called one-stop shops, information centres and open windows.

- Central to this concept is the issue of language, of communications that are accessible and can be understood, and of appropriate media for people who may be unable to read or write, as well as those who may struggle to obtain information for any reason (language, illiteracy, age or disability). The plain language movement has played an important role in changing government

thinking in this area. Its effects are best illustrated in the UK, British Colombia and the European Parliament. In Sweden, all legislation is referred to plain language experts once the legal drafting process is complete.

- The concept of subsidisation of various sectors is well-established in a number of countries. In some, the press as a whole is indirectly subsidised through VAT exemptions and tax deductions. In others, community media (particularly broadcast media) is subsidised by the state.

6.8 ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES WHICH SHOULD BE NOTED.

There are a number of environmental issues which should be noted, but which are not dealt with in detail:

- In countries which enjoy a free press, tension and competitiveness between the media and government is a normal feature. Governments simply try to improve their operational effectiveness to get their message out.

- Limitations on the ownership and control of the media, especially broadcast media, are also normal. In some countries, large block ownerships have been dealt with through anti-monopolies legislation. In several there are limits on foreign ownership.

- The principle of diversity is, in many countries, well established and - in addition to the mainstream press - localised and community media is often given support by the state.

- Another international trend is most commonly expressed in legislation to ensure that the right to information and privacy is formally established in tune with human rights norms and standards. Such legislation has been introduced in a number of countries and is subject to powerful lobby where it has not.

- The principle of creating a dialogue between government and citizens is well-established in many countries. Essential too is the principle that government must inform people of its policies, actions and motivations and give the necessary information not only for the exercise of rights, but for the governing of their lives.

- Governments often have internal regulations prohibiting the use of language and images that stereotype or denigrate minority groups and women. The Australian Government has prepared guidelines for all government communicators in this regard.

- The trend is towards the recognition of communications professionals. Thus, rather than appointing communications officers in an ad hoc manner from whatever field or professional background, communications is regarded as a profession in its own right.