

RECONCEPTUALISING COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE FIELD

Edited by: Valentina Baú

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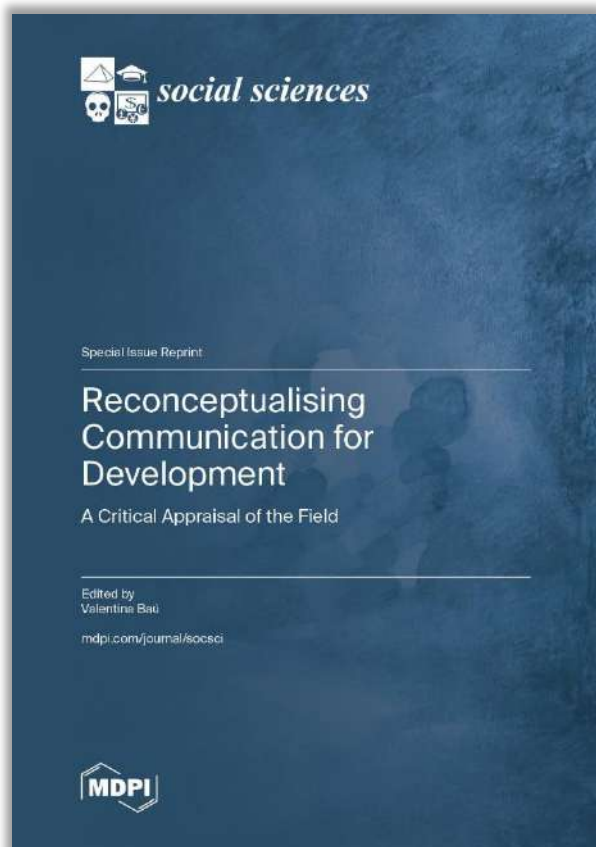
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My journey with communication for development (C4D) began as a student of agricultural extension, where I witnessed firsthand the power of participatory approaches in bridging knowledge gaps among farmers. During my PhD, I developed a multimedia training tool for scientific dairying practices, which taught me how tailored communication could transform rural livelihoods. Later, as a practitioner at the International Livestock Research Institute, working with women farmers in the high-altitude regions of Uttarakhand, I used video demonstrations to promote dual-purpose wheat and barley crops. This experience underscored the importance of context-specific, visual storytelling in driving adoption (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HMQo_Wdi1U). Today, as a faculty member in the Department of Agricultural Economics & Extension at Lovely Professional University, I continue to see how tools like Instagram and short-form videos are reshaping behavior—offering both new opportunities and fresh challenges for development communication. These diverse experiences have deepened my conviction that C4D must evolve beyond top-down messaging to embrace dialogue, reflexivity, and cultural relevance.

It is in this spirit that *Reconceptualising Communication for Development*, edited by Valentina Baú, emerges as a timely and provocative contribution. Drawing from a special issue of *Social Sciences*, the volume challenges the instrumentalist paradigms that have long dominated the field. Instead, it proposes a pluralistic, justice-oriented framework grounded in feminist critique, decoloniality, and indigenous epistemologies. As someone who has navigated academia, fieldwork, and digital innovation, I found the book to be a



resonant call to action—aligned with my journey of striving to make communication truly inclusive and transformative.

Baú's introduction sets the tone by calling attention to the limitations of techno-optimism and advocating for C4D that centres power asymmetries and local agency. Across ten chapters, the book offers a compelling blend of scholarly rigor and practitioner insight. In the opening chapter, Baú argues for a serious rethinking of the field in light of digital disruptions, persisting inequalities, and decolonial movements. Her critique of the dominant instrumental approach is sharpened by Karin Wilkins' analysis of digital media, which deeply resonated with my own work at ILRI. There, I observed how gender dynamics influenced the uptake of technologies; Wilkins' critique of "equalizing" digital narratives mirrored my realization that access to smartphones alone does not empower women farmers unless underlying patriarchal norms are addressed.

Thomas Tufte's chapter also struck a personal chord. His call to "unlearn" dominant Western communication models reminded me of my time studying in Germany, where Eurocentric theories often overshadowed indigenous knowledge systems—a gap I now strive to bridge in my teaching. Tufte's advocacy for multiple, especially marginalized, epistemologies highlights that communication for social change is not merely about techniques but about values and relationships rooted in solidarity and justice.

Other chapters continue this interrogation of dominant paradigms. Eliza Govender's work on participatory health communication echoed my experience with multimedia projects, where co-creation with farmers yielded more sustainable results than top-down messaging. Cardey and colleagues, drawing from long-term work in Malawi and the Philippines, highlight how political, institutional, and cultural contexts shape development communication—reinforcing my belief that context is everything. Their argument that C4D approaches must be responsive to local governance structures and histories was particularly validating given my own experiences navigating the demands of donor-driven projects.

The book also brings much-needed attention to indigenous and community-based communicative practices. The chapters by Herrera-Huéfano et al. and Dyll & Tomaselli illuminate how indigenous communities reclaim epistemic agency through oral traditions and community radio. Their work in Colombia, for instance, illustrates how collective memory and traditional knowledge challenge extractive, top-down communication models. Meanwhile, Pathak-Shelat and Bhatia critique India's EdTech landscape, warning against the detachment of digital tools from lived realities—a caution particularly relevant in today's algorithm-driven advocacy.

In a similarly critical vein, Noske-Turner and colleagues offer a creative metaphor of "subversive recipes" to describe how development practitioners and communities rework digital platforms within commercial and algorithmic ecosystems. Their chapter reveals the improvisation and resistance embedded in everyday digital practices and emphasizes the importance of agency even within constraining environments.

Ayres, Vega-Casanova, and Cabrera provide a powerful analysis of social movements in Latin America, revealing how strategic communication supports collective mobilization. Their focus

on Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBC) as a tool for building solidarity adds yet another dimension to the volume's call for justice-driven C4D.

Taken together, *Reconceptualising Communication for Development* is a landmark text that urges the field to move beyond instrumental uses of communication technologies. It pushes for a paradigm rooted in inclusion, dialogue, and power-awareness. Baú's introduction lays this foundation, and each chapter reinforces it: Wilkins injects feminist critique into digital discourse; Tufte promotes decolonial pedagogy; Govender and Cardey et al. foreground participatory communication as a political act; Herrera-Huéfano et al. and Dyll & Tomaselli center indigenous voices and knowledge; Pathak-Shelat, Bhatia, and Noske-Turner et al. challenge dominant ICT4D frameworks; and Ayres and co-authors emphasize communication's role in supporting justice-seeking movements.

The volume's overarching message is clear: ethical, transformative communication must be grounded in local realities, co-created with communities, and open to diverse worldviews. While the book is conceptually rich and empirically grounded, a more detailed guide to operationalizing these theories in grassroots projects would make it even more accessible to field practitioners—something I hope to contribute through my ongoing work. Still, this book is not just critique; it is a roadmap for those of us who believe communication can be a force for justice, provided we listen as much as we speak.

I believe *Reconceptualising Communication for Development* is both timely and highly relevant for the extension community. Since communication lies at the heart of what we do—facilitating dialogue, fostering participation, and driving behaviour change—this book offers critical insights and fresh perspectives to enrich our practice and deepen our impact. I am grateful to Rasheed Sulaiman V (AESA) for recommending it.

In conclusion, this volume is a vital intervention that pushes C4D toward greater ethical and epistemological accountability. Its emphasis on feminist critique, decolonial theory, indigenous knowledge, and critical pedagogy represents a necessary and hopeful reimagining of how communication can contribute to genuine social transformation in the 21st century.

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