Book Review

Evaluating Communication for Development

Tim Unwin

University of London, UK

June Lennie and Jo Tacchi, **Evaluating Communication for Development: A Framework for Social Change,** London, UK: Routledge, 2013, 189 pp., $41.40 (paperback). ISBN-10: 0415522595

There has long been a need for a comprehensive book that provides sound guidance on the methodologies available for evaluating communication for development initiatives in the interests of the intended beneficiaries. Authors June Lennie and Jo Tacchi, in **Evaluating Communication for Development: A Framework for Social Change,** go a long way toward delivering such a book, drawing both on their rich field experience in Asia and the Pacific and on their wider engagement with existing literature on evaluation in the field of communication. In essence, the book presents their conceptual and methodological framework for thinking about evaluating communication for development, building on seven components or principles: participatory, holistic, complex, critical, emergent, realistic, and learning based.

In practice, the framework builds on their engagement in five main research projects over the last decade, examples from which permeate the book: (a) research in 2002 on UNESCO's pilot community multimedia project, the Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project; (b) an ICT for Poverty Reduction project through which ethnographic action researchers were trained in nine community ICT centers in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan; (c) the LEARNERS project with rural women in Australia; (d) the Assessing Communication for Social Change project with community participants in Nepal; and (e) their development of a UN Inter-agency Resource Pack on Research, Monitoring and Evaluation of Communication for Development work. As the authors note, the book "advocates a focus on power, gender and social norms, takes a participatory, flexible, mixed methods approach to research and evaluation, and incorporates action learning and a critical, realistic approach to social change and evaluation" (p. 1).

This text is an ambitious project, and in a mere 189 pages, it is difficult satisfactorily to deliver on its claim to "comprehensiveness" (p. 1). There is simply insufficient space to address many of the complexities and nuances of the wide range of literatures upon which they draw. However, what their work does do is provide a useful handbook on evaluation that will undoubtedly be used by many development practitioners and doctoral candidates as a framework by which to evaluate and understand development interventions across a range of disciplines.

The introduction establishes the context for the book, outlining the need for such a framework, the field of communication for development, the practical role that this plays in the UN, and the themes of social change, participation, and sustainability. The introduction also summarizes the four sets of principles that underlie the framework that they subsequently develop: (a) the evaluation context and the social change process; (b) the evaluation process and design; (c) the use and selection of evaluation approaches, methodologies, and methods; and (d) the outcomes of evaluations and evaluation capacity development. However, there are three other areas that are (surprisingly) insufficiently addressed in this introduction.

Additional context in those three other areas would have substantially strengthened this introduction and, indeed, the book as a whole. First, the reasons for the rapid expansion of evaluation studies over the last decade—driven primarily by international donors' need to justify their use of taxpayer money in delivering development interventions—needed greater elaboration. Establishing the wider context within which their

work is situated would have enabled the authors to provide a stronger justification and context for their own work. This is important, because many people, particularly from the private sector and government, still do not readily acknowledge the importance of rigorous evaluation, claiming that it is obvious that such initiatives work.

Second, the concept of "empowerment," on which so much of *Evaluating Communication for Development* is premised, is complex and fraught with tensions. The book says little about such complexity, and had the authors addressed some of these difficulties in greater depth, they would have better established its credibility. In essence, there needs to be justification of the grounds upon which any external agents, however well-intentioned, claim to have a right to be involved in empowering others.

Third, a substantial review of all the fields of inquiry related to the authors' framework is insufficiently developed. Over the last decade, academics and practitioners from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds have sought to explain and understand the increasingly pervasive role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) throughout the world, and each academic brings a range of intellectual baggage to the field. Lennie and Tacchi both work at the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Australia, and their book is primarily situated within the field of communication studies. Accordingly, most of the literature that they address is drawn from this background. Their arguments would have been strengthened through wider engagement with more of the literature in other fields.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the authors' framework for evaluating communication for development based on the seven principles noted above. One difficulty that recurs in the book is particularly evident here, especially in the way the authors refer to "the values and principles of C4D" (p. 21). Often, they are in danger of oversimplifying the complexity and diversity of thought that exists in any one discipline or field of practice. Indeed, their style sometimes seems to imply that there is only a single set of accepted views in any one such field. Given the limited space they have in which to explore these issues, this was always going to be a challenge, but their argument would have been more convincing had they acknowledged at greater length the plurality of views existing within any one disciplinary approach to the field and the tensions among such views.

A particularly helpful aspect of this chapter, though, is the circular diagram representing the seven principles, with worked examples of different instances of community ecology maps from Lennie and Tacchi's work in Nepal. This simple illustration is likely to be one of the most widely adopted features of their work, because it readily enables a visual comparison to be made of such communicative ecologies.

Chapter 2 concludes with a brief comparison of their new framework and four other frameworks that have been used for evaluation in "international development or C4D" (p. 38), at least two of which they were themselves heavily involved in formulating. A challenge here is that many other approaches to evaluation have been used in international development, and the authors could have compared their own work to these in more detail here—instead of leaving such a discussion to chapter 6—so that readers could more clearly understand the distinct advantages offered by the authors' approach.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of their thoughts relating to some approaches to evaluation in international development. The authors advocate using a systems approach and complexity theory to understanding the intricacies of social change. They also develop a critique of the instrumental, accountability-based approaches that often limit the effectiveness of communication for development initiatives.

The next chapter teases out some of the challenges in conceptualizing, managing, and planning such evaluations, including context and structure, institutional and country-level challenges, attitudes and policies of funders and management, conceptualizing outsourcing and managing research and evaluation, and assessing impacts and outcomes. In resolving these challenges, the authors particularly encourage users to consider evaluation as an ongoing learning experience. This represents a shift from proving impacts to improving initiatives, using evaluation to support the development of innovation, and redirecting the focus to internal and community accountability. These recommendations are to be applauded, although their shift in approach and definition might warrant a new vocabulary to differentiate its language clearly from the kinds of after-the-event evaluations that many funders will persist in requiring. For this reason many practitioners tend to use the word *monitoring* to address the internal, ongoing process of organizational improvement while leaving the word *evaluation* for the subsequent external review process.

Given the importance of capacity development in evaluation methodologies, the next chapter delves deeper into some of the constraints and challenges in developing the skills and the understanding required for its successful implementation. Chapter 5 also emphasizes the need for more holistic, learning-oriented approaches that focus on the longterm, the need to move away from instrumentalist approaches, and the need to develop more action-oriented methods. The authors conclude the chapter by arguing that a shift is needed to build the capacity of an organization as a whole, involving all stakeholders in the process.

Chapter 6 returns to methods that have previously been used to evaluate communication for development initiatives and compares them with the authors' own framework, drawing heavily on the consultations that they undertook for their UN handbook. The approaches reviewed here include logical frameworks, theories of change, outcome mapping, "most significant change technique," ethnographic action research, participatory rural communities appraisal, case study approaches, and quantitative survey-based methodologies. As noted above, this information would have been helpful to readers unfamiliar with this field had it appeared earlier in the book. Moreover, it is by no means an easy task to review comprehensively all of these approaches in a mere 28 pages, and sometimes the depth of analysis is compromised. In concluding this chapter, the authors advocate the use of a range of methods appropriate to varying circumstances and contexts.

Lennie and Tacchi conclude with an account of their own framework, highlighting important attributes that must be in place for its successful implementation. In particular, they reiterate four requirements: (a) evaluation is best considered as an ongoing action learning process; (b) a shift is needed from proving impacts to improving development practices; (c) evaluation can be used to support the development of innovations; and (d) a change in focus is needed from external to community accountability. Given that they seemed to suggest in the previous chapter that different approaches should be used in different contexts, the argument here could have been more forthright concerning which existing approaches they think best fit different aspects of their framework.

Overall, *Evaluating Communication for Development* is useful for all those engaged in using evaluation to help change the ways in which development is undertaken. The book's main values are in serving as a guide to key principles that would enhance future evaluation studies while providing a short introduction to some of the literature for those who wish to explore these issues in greater depth. As Lennie and Tacchi point out, evaluation is complex and messy, and there is a danger that in trying to make sense of some of this messiness in a relatively short book they occasionally oversimplify the arguments. The enormous complexity of critical theory and the fundamental differences between structuralist and systems-based approaches to changing or describing societies are, for example, insufficiently addressed. Such debates lie at the heart of questions about empowerment and evaluation. It would have been appreciated had the authors explored such tensions at length. I imagine, though, that the publishers were eager to keep the book as succinct as possible, so that it could indeed serve as a useful guide to practitioners in the field. ∎

Tim Unwin, UNESCO Chair in ICT4D and Emeritus Professor of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, and Secretary General, Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation. tim.unwin@rhul.ac.uk