

## Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (ACP-EC)

The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) was established in 1983 under the Lomé Convention between the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) Group of States and the European Union Member States. Since 2000, it has operated within the framework of the ACP-EC Cotonou Agreement.

CTA's tasks are to develop and provide services that improve access to information for agricultural and rural development, and to strengthen the capacity of ACP countries to produce, acquire, exchange and utilise information in this area. CTA's programmes are organised around four principal themes: developing information management and partnership strategies needed for policy formulation and implementation; promoting contact and exchange of experience; providing ACP partners with information on demand; and strengthening their information and communication capacities.

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Information Revolutions

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How information and communication management  
is changing the **LIVES** of rural people

Paul Mundy and Jacques Sultan

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# Contents

**Acknowledgements** vi

**Foreword** vii

**Introduction** 1

**Radio and television** 11

Local information for local people 21

Local information for local people 21

Video in service of development 41

Soap opera for development 13

Organizing to help ourselves 63

Local radio meeting rural people's needs 35

A question of survival 57

A news agency for Africa 73

**Newspapers and newsletters** 47

La Voix du Paysan: A platform for rural people 49

A news agency for Africa 73

Panos, the environment and democracy 69

**Literacy and local languages** 77

Demand-driven learning in Uganda 85

Speaking our language 97

Literacy and livelihoods in Uganda 79

Speaking our language 97

What good is literacy if there is nothing to read? 89

**Computers and telecommunications** 101

Africa Online and the e-touch initiative 103

The Nakaseke telecentre 107

Plenty to talk about 113

**Farmers' groups and markets** 121

Giving farmers a Voice 123

FONGS – organizing Senegal's farmers 129

Transparent money management 133

The PELUM Association 137

The case of KACE 143

**Farmers' knowledge** 147

Traditional experts and barefoot veterinarians in northern Kenya 149

Watching the birds in Trinidad 153

Food from the forest 159

**Research and extension links** 163

How ENDA combines research, training and extension 163

Fighting the hibiscus mealy bug 173

Workshops to produce information materials 177

Controlling cassava mosaic virus in Uganda 169

The African Crop Science Journal 187

Workshops to produce information materials 177

Pacific pests 183

Sharing scarce resources 191

Controlling cassava mosaic virus in Uganda 169

Gaining through collaboration 193

Pacific pests 183

**Libraries** 217

Serving the Pacific 199

Challenges in paradise 199

Working blindfolded 219

The ITDG Resource Centre 225

**Further reading** 228

The ITDG Resource Centre 225

**Acronyms** 232

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NOTE:

The prices and currency conversions given in this book are as of January 1999.

## FOREWORD

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ACCESSING INFORMATION coming from physically remote rural locations in the developing world was, until recently, difficult and costly; and it was equally difficult to deliver information to the farmers, extension workers and researchers who live and work in such places. The situation was often little better in the major cities, and to communicate between developing countries required the patience of a saint. Telex services were tedious, telephones were unreliable, publications were costly, mail services were deteriorating and radio services were few and of poor quality. Frustratingly, although there had been an 'information explosion' elsewhere in the world, that phenomenon seemed inaccessible to the developing countries. There was little expectation that the information needs of the developing world could be easily met, let alone those of the agricultural sector. For a long time, therefore, the global store of agricultural knowledge seemed likely to remain just as inaccessible as before.

More recently, the virtual explosion in new information services, and a range of personal gadgets allowing point-to-point communications, have touched the developing world. Cheaper services and new gadgets and products have spawned a number of new opportunities, particularly as governments have taken steps or been prevailed upon to permit less regulated and more open societies. In the wake of the changes, however, enterprising individuals have devised various ways of capitalising on the income-earning opportunities available. Information and communication developments have begun to touch rural populations just as extensively as they had earlier touched the urban communities. The entrepreneurs and enterprising individuals engaged in this exercise paved the way for the effective application of newer and more exciting information and communication technologies to the agricultural and rural sectors, thereby providing the wherewithal for their transformation in the years to come.

The perception that information exchange problems still constitute a major constraint to agricultural development remains widespread, and gives rise to negative views of the prospects for improvement. Yet enterprising individuals and institutions have, against all the odds, taken steps – some modest, some bold – to help revolutionise the management of information for agricultural development. Their achievements deserve to be highlighted, and that is why CTA has published this book. We expect that by so doing we will encourage the sharing of experiences and will raise awareness of what can and has been achieved. It is our fervent hope that others will be motivated to follow these examples in the context of their own lives.



*Carl B. Greenidge*  
*Director, CTA*



# Introduction

PEOPLE ARE GREGARIOUS animals. Alone, each of us is pretty helpless. Alone, we would be condemned to wander, naked and hungry, in search of food and water.

But if we get together, work together, we can do marvellous things. We can build cities, find better ways of growing and storing food, make gadgets that make life more comfortable, build great civilizations, construct spacecraft and reach for the moon.

Information and communication are what makes this possible. Two people cannot make even the simplest house if they don't know what to build, and if they cannot communicate with each other. Let alone a city or a spacecraft.

Information is a basic element in any development activity. Information must be available and accessible to all, be it scientific, technical, economic, social, institutional, administrative, legal, historical or cultural in nature. Information is useful only if it is available, if the users have access to it, in the appropriate form and language – i.e., if it is communicated, if it circulates among the various users with appropriate facilities, if it is exchanged.

Communication (we take this to include information and education as well) is astonishingly diverse. It covers a range from the simplest conversation between two people to the most sophisticated mass medium; from a mother teaching her child to the world's great libraries and universities. Try listing all the different forms of media, starting with television, newspapers, e-mail, billboards, telephones, apprenticeships, schools. . . and it is easy to fill several pages.

Money may make the world go round, but it is communication that makes it spin faster. (Indeed, money can be seen as a form of information: information about value.)

Without communication, then, progress would be unimaginable. Why, then, is it so neglected in development efforts? Huge research organizations, whose sole purpose is to develop new farming technologies (i.e., generate new information) and *communicate them to farmers*, relegate the communication part to the dustbin. Instead of creating wealth, research findings gather dust. Agricultural extension agencies (never very effective) are being downsized and closed, to be replaced by – well, nothing. Institutions sometimes seem more concerned with self-advancement than with serving their clients. The potential of media that do reach people in remote rural areas (channels such as radio, market traders, churches and mosques) is ignored.

## New ideas...

Fortunately, it seems that things are changing. Spurred by two things – the democratic revolutions of the 1980s and 1990s (and the waves of restructuring and decentralization that followed), and the technological leaps made in computers and telephones – there is new interest in all aspects of information and communication for development.

Along with the new freedoms and the new technologies have come new ideas. On the way out are the old ideas that the role of communication was merely to convey technical messages from researchers to farmers, and social messages from policy-makers to groups of citizens.

These messages were sometimes designed specifically for certain “target groups” – farmers, women, cattle-owners and so forth – and members of these groups were sometimes involved in developing the messages. But *control* over the messages remained with those who controlled the media: government officials, project officers, technicians, newspaper proprietors. Rural producers’ and citizens’ groups were almost never in control: they remained mere consumers.

Over the past 20 years, these ideas have evolved. Communication is less and less concerned with merely transmitting messages (though that is still important). It is becoming more open. It is being based more on interactivity, negotiation, exchange, expression and, yes, conflict, over the economic, social and cultural issues of the various players. Grassroots actors, citizens’ groups and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are increasingly learning how to use communication tools to promote their own agendas.

And networks of users are emerging: cooperatives, producers’ groups, research networks, groups of radio stations. Many of these groups cut across traditional boundaries: NGOs, universities, government research centres and farmers all working together to solve a problem (see the story in this book on the PELUM association, pp. 137–142) They decide what types of information they need, and find it through dialogue with other groups or by tapping resource centres and information banks.

### ...and new tools

Along with the democratic revolution has come the revolution in technology. Thanks to computers and CD-ROMs, managing and storing information is now so much easier. Telephones, e-mail and the Internet are beginning to make their mark in rural areas (see the section on “Computers and telecommunications”, pp. 101–119).

But it’s not just a high-tech revolution. The media have become closer to the citizens, more interactive. This is especially so for community radio and for newspapers in local languages, which have developed rapidly in rural areas. These new media are organized as networks, allowing rich information flows and greater access to end-users (see the sections on “Radio and television”, pp. 11–46 and “Newspapers and newsletters”, pp. 47–75).

Various tools and devices for grassroots communication have been developed, such as flip charts, audiocassettes, videos, resource centres, photo albums and community theatre. Research and development projects now often begin with a “participatory rural appraisal”: a way to help local people generate information about their environment and about themselves, which can then be used to make sure that the development activities truly serve their needs.

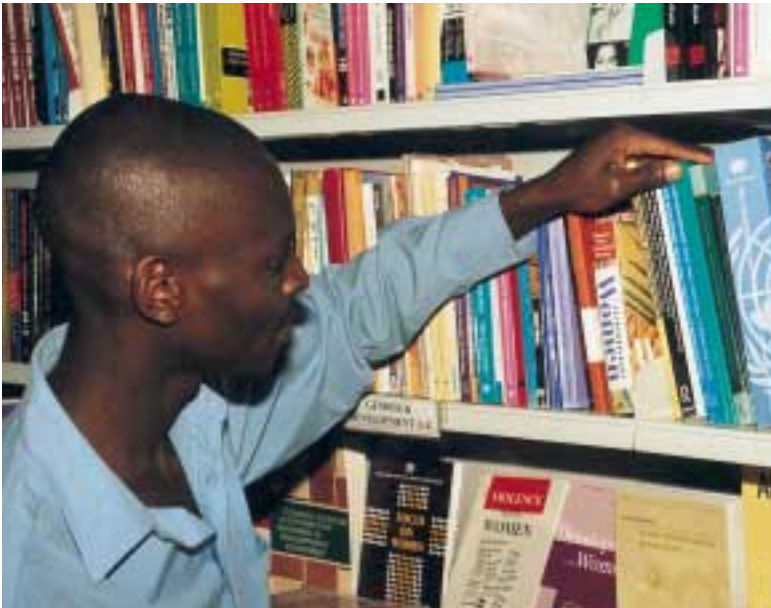
## Three tasks

Efforts to use communication in development aim to do three things:

- Provide information to audiences;
- Help audiences find information;
- Facilitate dialogue among audiences.

### *Providing information to audiences*

The first of these tasks is the traditional role of communication. Take an agricultural research institute as an example. The institute scientists identify a new cassava variety that is resistant to a pest (see the story “Controlling cassava mosaic virus in Uganda”, pp. 169–172). How do they get that information out to farmers and traders? And how do they persuade farmers to grow the new variety? They must not only make sure there are enough cassava stakes for the farmers to plant; they must also train extension staff, promote the variety on the radio, provide technical information in the form of brochures, plant demonstration plots so that the farmers can see the variety growing and, not least, persuade policy-makers to give the matter the highest priority so as to avert famine.



Of course, not all of these tasks fall to the researchers themselves. Specialized institutions – extension agencies, printers, radio stations, and many others – assist in the process. But there are so often gaps: the one between high-status research and low-status extension is the widest and most notorious. All too often, the gaps are ignored, the communication effort fails, the new variety stays at the research station, and the farmers go hungry.

There is a lot of information on development, but most of it is written by people from developed countries and is hard to find in Africa. The Legacy Bookstore (left) in Nairobi, Kenya is one of the few places on the continent that has a large selection of development literature for sale (Photo: Paul Mundy)

It is relatively easy to reach certain audiences: officials, decision-makers, researchers. There are relatively few of them; they work for certain institutions; their jobs, names and addresses are known; and they can be invited to meetings.

But the story is very different for local and grassroots actors: extension workers, community organizers, villagers, farmers, livestock owners, craftspeople, women. There are millions of them, scattered in thousands of villages, involved in all kinds of activities, and facing a host of constraints.

To serve these people, it is necessary to develop tools, networks and opportunities for exchange, encouraging people to learn and to pass on information to others.

Some of these tools are already known and tested: rural radio, newsletters, training for extension personnel, extension leaflets, demonstration plots, schools, literacy-training centres, youth centres, farmers' organizations, cultural or religious organizations, market information points.

New media appear very promising, especially to serve the intermediaries in the knowledge system: CD-ROMs, e-mail, the Internet. Others have the potential to serve end-users directly: examples are community telecentres, and the use of satellites for local radios.

### *Helping audiences find information*

Information acquisition is the opposite side of the coin. A farmer whose cassava field is being eaten by pests cannot wait for the research organization to release a new variety, or for the extension worker to make his monthly (more likely, six-monthly) visit. She needs information, fast.

Helping the farmer find the answer to a problem that she faces is rather different from supplying her with information about a problem identified by the researcher. What if the farmer isn't interested in cassava pests, but is thinking about growing oranges and wants to know about the market? Where can she go for advice?

The acquisition of information (the demand side) meshes with information provision (the supply side) in various ways. The two come together during meetings with extension workers, in information centres and community libraries, during visits by farmers to research stations and demonstration plots, in farming-systems-research sites. The communication system must be designed so as to facilitate dialogue, questioning and experimentation. The preachy extension agent, the ivory-tower researcher, the status-conscious bureaucrat, the poorly organized library: all eliminate the possibility that users will be able to get the information they need.

Researchers have a need for information too. They must acquire information about research methodologies and advances in science, and about the problems farmers face. The former need is supplied by libraries, journals, books and conferences, and increasingly by e-mail, the

# Introduction

Internet and CD-ROM. The latter is increasingly being supplied by a whole set of participatory research tools: participatory appraisal and participatory technology development, which help researchers and extension personnel understand farmers' constraints and opportunities, and enable them to work with farmers to overcome these constraints.

## *Facilitating dialogue*

The transition to democracy in much of the world since the 1980s has decentralized the corridors of power, and has given rural people hitherto unknown access to decision-makers. Farmers are organizing themselves to put pressure on the authorities to deal with their problems. With the help of NGOs and media such as community radio, rural people are slowly learning how to use this new opportunity.

The media play a key role in this. A radio station or a newspaper can be an instrument of repression, or it can be a medium of expression. A government-controlled press stifles discussion and quickly loses credibility. A free press can permit and foster confrontation, debate and negotiation. It can identify constraints, promote initiatives, convey new ideas, gather opinions, sensitize people. It can favour expression by those who can rarely express themselves, such as women, children and young people, and the rural poor.

Aside from radio and newspapers, media that can play such roles include audiocassettes, video, flip charts and traditional communication methods such as theatre, music, story-telling, puppets and market plays.

## About this book

This book is about successes. It is about how certain individuals or organizations are changing the way communication works, how they are making a difference to the lives and livelihoods of rural people.

We have chosen as examples about 40 organizations in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Given time, we could have covered more: if your organization is not covered, please don't feel slighted.

Success is easy if you have enough money. We have tried to avoid the large, well-funded, expatriate-staffed development projects, big foreign NGOs and international research institutes. Many of these are doing excellent communication work. But they are not typical of the developing world: they are islands of affluence within a sea of scarce resources, under-funded institutions, and poorly trained and equipped personnel. We wanted to feature some of the many *local or national initiatives* that are doing good communication work despite all the constraints they face. If they can do it, we reasoned, why can't others?

A second criterion for inclusion was a *track record*. In response to our call for information (see overleaf), we received many fascinating reports of new initiatives, especially ideas on how to use the Internet to promote development. But new ideas are, by definition, untested. We wanted to focus on approaches that have been found to work.

A village meeting in Senegal, where pictures are being used to communicate information  
(Photo: Jacques Sultan)



A third criterion was *sustainability*. We rejected projects that were totally reliant on donor funding. End of funding? End of project. We also excluded institutions that seemed to be over-reliant on a single donor – though maybe a few slipped through the cracks.

What's left? Quite a lot. Government agencies and private enterprises, farmers' groups and NGOs, research and extension institutions, industry associations, media companies and networks.

We included organizations that relied on donors if they had a record of being able to raise funds from several sources. We also included institutions, such as the IIRR (International Institute of Rural Reconstruction) and ITDG (Intermediate Technology Development Group), which are branches of international NGOs but whose local offices are entirely staffed by people from developing countries and which raise most their funding in-country (see the stories "Traditional experts and barefoot veterinarians in northern Kenya", pp. 149–154, "Workshops to produce information materials", pp. 177–182, and "The ITDG Resource Centre", pp. 225–227).

Our choice of organizations was determined by the information available to us. We drew on personal knowledge, discussions with colleagues and calls for information sent out over the Internet to identify potential organizations to write about. We personally visited organizations in six countries: Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali, Senegal and Uganda. That leaves out huge swathes of Africa and all the Caribbean and the Pacific: colleagues kindly wrote stories or provided information about organizations there.

And of course, we combed the Internet: but note, we were forced to reject most of the fascinating information on the Internet because it was about the wealthy international organizations or donor projects that we had chosen to exclude.

Throughout our visits, we were struck, and inspired, by the enthusiasm of the communications staff we talked to. Working under difficult conditions, often for long hours and with poor salaries and limited equipment, many are highly motivated and care deeply about their work. They listen to their audiences. They try out new ideas. They strive for quality.

Of course, few successes are complete. The organizations we describe still face many problems: lack of funding, uncertain institutional futures, poor organization, lack of skills and equipment. Economic and social conditions change, and technology changes faster. For some

organizations and activities it is still too early to say whether they will prosper. In fact, one of the organizations we most admired, the Arid Lands Information Network, which has done some excellent networking in the Sahel and Eastern Africa, was undergoing major restructuring while we were gathering information. So we were forced to drop plans to write about it.

## Casting the net

We have cast the net widely. Some of these institutions have information or communication as their *raison d'être* a library, a press agency, a media-production house. Other stories are about organizations that mainly do something else, but have found that information or communication are vital to what they do; examples are research institutes (see “Controlling cassava mosaic virus in Uganda”, pp. 169–172 and the “Research networks” section, pp. 191–216) and the Kenya Agricultural Commodity Exchange (see “The case of KACE”, pp. 143–146).

We began by looking at institutions that deal only with agriculture. But we quickly realized that it is impossible to separate farming from other types of information. There are very few newspapers or radio stations devoted solely to farming, yet these are vital forms of communication in rural areas. Telephones – agricultural? During our travels, we witnessed them being used to order feeds and farm chemicals, check on the availability of supplies, call veterinarians, and trade produce. If there is a communication technology that will transform rural areas in the next 10 years, it is mobile phones (see “Plenty to talk about”, pp. 113–119).

Faced with this multiplicity of media and overlapping uses, it would seem shortsighted to focus only on those media normally regarded as “agricultural”: extension bulletins, research journals, research networks. We’ve covered them too, but they are really only a small part of the richness of what has come to be known as the “agricultural knowledge system”.

We have covered government, non-government and academic efforts, but we have neglected much of the private sector. In addition to the few private sector stories that we have included, there should be stories about seed suppliers, produce marketers, credit providers, processors, industry associations and exporters. Sorry, there aren’t.

Other missing topics? Private publishers, booksellers, indigenous communication, street theatre, participatory appraisal, farmer field-schools, religious organizations, lobbying, artwork and comics, television, schools and universities... the list is long. Again, we apologise. Maybe in the next edition.

## Arbitrary categories

The book has nine sections, each with up to six stories about particular institutions or sets of institutions. There are sections on radio and television, newspapers and newsletters, literacy and local languages, computers and telecommunications, farmers’ groups and markets, farmers’ knowledge, research and extension links, research networks, and libraries.

These categories are, we admit, pretty arbitrary. Why not a separate section on extension materials? Why not, indeed? Couldn't the story about the Poultry Surveillance Unit (see "Watching the birds in Trinidad", pp. 155–157) be put in the section on research and extension? Well, yes, it could.

Such confusion is inevitable. Communication organizations tend to do several different things: a ministry's media production unit may publish a newsletter and extension leaflets, produce radio and video programmes, run training courses and maintain a library. The same medium can be used for different things: most of the airwaves are filled with music and entertainment, not agriculture. To be commercially successful, a newspaper has to carry a broad range of topics: agriculture competes for space with news, sport, comic strips, culture, health, education, women's issues, politics, society and economics. Just like in the developed world.

Plus, there are interrelationships among the media: local radio stations promote reading and writing; radio and video can be carried on the Internet, and an information campaign may (and if it is to be successful, *should*) use a combination of radio, television, print and face-to-face extension.

### Paying for it all

Admittedly, most of the organizations we feature still receive some support from donors. That is perhaps inevitable. The countries we cover are poor. Governments are strapped for cash and, unlike in developed countries, there aren't lots of wealthy benefactors or middle-class people who provide money to charities. Rural people cannot afford to pay for many services, even ones they see as vital.

This continued dependence on donors is perhaps indicative of the state of communication in developing countries. Yes, donor support is still necessary, and probably will be for a long time to come. There is the danger of "donor fatigue": project officers and board members who question why a radio station or an NGO should continue to receive support for yet another year.

The answer is that successful communication efforts represent large sunk costs. Establishing a radio station or newspaper takes time, patience, effort and skill. Closing it down and opening a new one would mean a whole new set of investments, a whole new set of delays. The trick is gradually to wean the recipient institution away from an over-reliance on donors, and help it seek alternative, sustainable sources of funding.

Once they are established, the media are incredibly versatile: they can be used to do all kinds of things. The *Tembea na Majira* radio programme in Kenya (see "Soap opera for development", pp. 13–19) is an example: at the time we visited Kenya, the programme was teaching listeners about crop pests, malaria and wife-beating; later, the plot and the topics moved on.

To survive, communication efforts must continue to innovate, to try new things. There is no point in continuing to broadcast the same old programme week after week, or to keep putting out a newsletter that no one reads. The onus is on communication professionals to keep

# Introduction

their ears close to the ground, to do careful research, to monitor their own activities, to understand their audiences and encourage feedback, to adapt and innovate. Only in that way will they have an impact. And if they do so, they fully deserve continued support.

Is it possible for rural communication activities to be profitable, and therefore to be self-sustaining? The answer is yes – at least for certain types of media. The clearest example is telephones, as shown by the stories about mobile phones in Uganda and fixed-line telecentres in Senegal (see “Plenty to talk about”, pp. 113–119), and e-mail services (see “Africa Online and the e-touch initiative”, pp. 103–106). A sizeable initial investment is necessary, yes (the same is true anywhere), but once the system is up and running, it is highly profitable, and this profitability feeds further growth.



Interviewing farmers for a radio programme in Ghana  
(Photo: Jacques Sultan)

Some rural newspapers manage to cover a fair proportion of their costs from sales and advertising.

It's possible that they could eventually become self-supporting. The same is true of radio and television: advertising, sponsorships, payments for services such as announcements, and spin-offs such as T-shirts and hats can all be significant revenue streams.

For other media, such as extension bulletins and research journals, it is harder to see how they can pay for themselves. But even here there are untapped opportunities. One is to foster collaboration between government agencies and the private sector. An example: extension agencies typically print a few hundred copies of a booklet, because that is all they can afford. The booklets are distributed free, but there is no money to mail them, so they sit and rot in a storeroom in the capital city.

A solution? Sell extension leaflets rather than give them away. And make sure that the money goes into producing more copies, not into some general fund. Or strike a deal with a private publisher: split the publishing costs and sell the book on the open market through booksellers, news vendors, street hawkers, farm-supply merchants, and so on. Selling books provides an excellent source of feedback: it's immediately obvious which books are in demand and which are duds. And the money can be used to produce the next edition of the bestseller.

Another possible source of funding is advertising. This is typically seen as a no-no by governments: "We can't put advertising in our publication because it would imply we endorse a particular product." But if handled the right way, advertising could not only pay for a share of that extension bulletin; it could also get the information distributed. An example: an extension agency could write pesticide-safety leaflets and arrange to have them distributed along with each bottle of chemical. The agency is happy: it gets its message out. The agrochemicals firm is happy: farmers are more likely to use the chemical safely and effectively. The farmers are happy: they stay healthy, and the pests are controlled.

The only thing stopping such collaboration is government rules. But government rules are changing. Entire departments are being privatized, and others are now required to cover some of their own costs. This presents an ideal opportunity to explore the potential of such partnerships.

### Don't view communication as a cost

Research institutions, especially, all too often see communication as a cost. It comes right at the end of the research process (but it shouldn't; it should help guide the research process all the way through, right from the planning stage). In these days of tight budgets, it is easy to trim the print run of a magazine from 5000 to 2000, to 1000, to 500. The copies of the magazines are still there for the boss to see, aren't they? No matter that they are no longer delivered to farmers.

No – communication is an integral part of the development process: as vital as the researcher who breeds a new crop variety, or the microscope he uses. Without communication, development efforts are doomed to fail. With it, they might just succeed.