

Building Multi-Sector Partnerships for Progress with Strategic, Participatory Communication: A Case Study from Colombia



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Abstract

This study focuses on the use of strategic, participatory communication to build multi-sector partnerships. A multidisciplinary literature informs the dimensions of partnership formation and development. A case study from Colombia describes the role of strategic, participatory communication in facilitating multi-sector partnerships. Results indicate that partnerships require a clear expression of collective commitment; avoidance of dominance by partners; agreement on shared goals and key messages; and a transparent, inclusive and protracted dialogic process to achieve synergy.

Key words

Strategic communications, participatory communication, multi-sector partnerships.

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Resumen

This study focuses on the use of strategic, participatory communication to build multi-sector partnerships. A multidisciplinary literature informs the dimensions of partnership formation and development. A case study from Colombia describes the role of strategic, participatory communication in facilitating multi-sector partnerships. Results indicate that partnerships require a clear expression of collective commitment; avoidance of dominance by partners; agreement on shared goals and key messages; and a transparent, inclusive and protracted dialogic process to achieve synergy.

Palabras clave

Estrategias de comunicación, comunicación participativa, alianzas multisectoriales.

INTRODUCTION

Social, economic, political, and environmental challenges facing society all over the world are demanding the intervention and collaboration by business, government, nonprofit, and civic organizations. For instance, the alliances to Save the North Sea, HIV/Aids campaigns in Africa and the Caribbean, and Hurricane Katrina and Southeast Asian tsunami relief efforts are examples of such complex scenarios that have required protracted massive resources and intervention. Organizations combine resources and specialized expertise creating unique synergy as multi-sector partnerships for social change, economic development, and nation/community building. Their mission is assessing needs and seeking solutions to problems that impact partner organizations and society as a whole. Corporate social responsibility, philanthropy, strategic planning, and sustainability are often factors influencing this social dynamic.

Reaching and maintaining accords and dealing with the challenge of multi-sector partnerships often calls for a competent public relations strategist who is able to accept an extended responsibility: to function as mediator and clearinghouse of communication and relational processes beyond his or her own organizational boundaries. This view is consistent with the communitarian perspective of public relations. It suggests that to understand community it is necessary to capture the experiences of its members, work together toward common goals, and facilitate participation by diverse groups for increased expertise, skills, and resources to achieve broader solutions and improved quality of life

(Hallahan, 2004, Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Martinez & Kiousis, 2006; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001, 2003). Molleda (2001) explains that from a Latin American perspective, public relations professionals are called to be agents of "social transformation" and part of the "social conscience" of their organizations. In addition public relations in Latin America aims to contribute to the well-being of the social environments where organizations operate. This is especially the case when the active participation of organizations that operate within a community is needed to intervene and help to solve complex situations in which a single organization may find itself overwhelmed. In this context, a public relations professional's efforts are only as good as the strategic tools she uses

This purpose of this study is to illustrate how strategic, participatory communication supports public relations professionals who are spearheading multi-sector partnership building efforts. It examines a case study from Colombia: Strategic Plans North and South of the Aburrá Valley. Concepts borrowed from the literature on partnership formation and strategic, participatory communications are combined to generate a typology of indicators that may be useful to increase the potential for success in the various stages of the partnering process.

The industrial and commercial city of Medellín is at the center of a group of ten municipalities (including Medellín) that with government, nonprofit, civic, and private organizations are working for an integral development project for the betterment of quality of life, which includes housing, employment, natural environment,

and education components ("Quiénes participan?," n.d.)

As in many other developing countries, public relations professionals in Colombia play a social transformation role within their social milieu (Molleda & Suárez, 2006). Molleda and Suárez (2005) state: "Today's volatile political and economic environment in Colombia demand that public relations practitioners focus on the need to develop campaigns to build trust in organizations, encourage peace and promote organizational changes as well as nation-building efforts both internally and externally" (p. 28). This study will look closely at the role of the public relations practitioners as a facilitator of strategic, participatory communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Multi-Sector Partnership: Strategic Plans North and South of the Aburrá Valley

This section describes the creation of a major multi-sector partnership centered around the formulation of "Strategic Plans North and South of the Aburrá Valley" located in the Andean Region of Colombia. This plan generated alliances to financially support and work on three priority areas for development identified during the collaborative planning exercises. The goal of this multi-sector partnership is "to promote the integrative and sustainable development of the Aburrá Valley, as a response to the needs and initiatives of the population; to take advantage of the economic, social and cultural resources of the territory and integrate all actors into a

set of inclusive, competitive and sustainable processes for improved quality of life" ("Alianza estratégica," 2006, p. 4). Specifically, the objectives of this multi-sector partnership are to identify common problems and opportunities related to the protection and management of the natural environment, land use, human mobility and transportation, housing, security from violence, employment, and wealth generation in the region ("Alianza estratégica," 2006).

The north zone of the valley consist of four municipalities – Barbosa, Bello, Copacabana, and Girardota; and the south has five municipalities – Caldas, Envigado, La Estrella, Sabaneta, and Itagüi. The center zone of the valley is the city of Medellín; the capital of the Antioquia Department (equivalent to a U.S. state) and the second largest city and premier commercial hub in Colombia.

The initial multi-sector partnership coordinated the planning process of the nine municipalities. Medellín did not participate because of the complexity of its urban infrastructure. Historically, municipalities planned individually despite their overlapping geographic limits and shared challenges. In particular, Aburrá North faces high poverty and unemployment levels, despite its human and environmental resources (i.e., experienced leadership in development, tropical weather, extensive farming land, and rooted cultural traditions) ("La zona norte," n.d.).

The formulation of the strategic plans was initiated by a business-sector association (i.e., Entrepreneurial Corporation Pro Aburrá North) and the Barbosa municipality to identify and develop a strategic plan to tackle common

problems. The leading businesspeople and public-sector officials then approached other municipalities and organizations (i.e., Girardota and Copacabana, a regional planning agency – Metropolitan Area of the Aburrá Valley, and a non-governmental and nonprofit organization – Social Foundation) (“El inicio,” 2005). Finally, Bello Municipality joined this initial partnership. This process took seven years in the making (1997-2004) and it was possible by a series of agreements and administrative actions.

In 2004, a second multi-sector partnership was created in Aburrá South, by the Envigado Municipality. The five municipalities, the regional agency, Social Foundation, and the Chamber of Commerce integrated the second partnership and followed the model setup in the North. Two partners, the regional planning agency and the non-governmental organization (Social Foundation) created in 1911, became the leaders of a far-reaching initiative. Their goal: the integration of the two partnerships and plans (North and South) to achieve a sense of a consolidated territory. The multi-sector partnerships are not intended to create new bureaucratic entities to substitute functions and competencies of government agencies (“Alianza estratégica,” 2006). Instead, their aim is to help create a mechanism for follow-up, execution, evaluation, and fine-tuning of the action plans.

In 2005, Social Foundation became the coordinator for the integration of the North and South partnerships. A strategic, participatory communication plan for a multi-sector partnership was devised in January 2005 and executed from March 2005 to October 2006. The plan included logistical and

financial support for the coordination of 63 workshops with a total participation of 2,151 people (“Más de 2.000,” 2005).

Multi-Sector Partnership Building

Enz, Inman, and Lankau (2000) explain that “[s]ince the industrial revolution, the dominant design for partnerships around the world has been based on the economic theory and justifications of self-interest and wealth maximization” (p. 185). Despite their focus on sustainable development led by multinational corporations, they also expand the reach of partnerships to include citizens, public agencies, local businesses, and government. “The partnerships are win-win arrangements in which all actors have responsibility for the development of the total community,” Enz et al. state (p. 188). Our study adopts this definition.

In particular, multi-sector partnerships are challenging to form and maintain because members are “likely to have noticeably different performance measures, competitive dynamics, organization cultures, decision-making styles, personnel competencies, professional languages, incentive and motivational structures, and emotional content” (Austin, 2000:14). This requires that a multi-sector partnership as a whole adopt a common set of goals and values.

Austin, Reficco, and SEKN Research Team (2004a) summarize a three stage of a collaboration continuum for partnership development: philanthropic, transactional, and integrative. The philanthropic stage entails corporate donations attending requests from nonprofits. The transactional stage focuses on

specific activities between private and nonprofit organizations with a significant two-way value exchange. Lastly, the integrative stage includes “strategic alliances that involve a meshing of missions, a synchronization of strategies, and compatibility of values” (Austin et al., 2004: 5). Austin (2000) emphasizes that “Collaborative relationships will increasingly migrate from the traditionally philanthropic, characterized by benevolent donor and grateful recipient, toward deeper, strategic alliances” (p. 1). The multi-sector partnership documented and analyzed in this study follows the integrative collaboration approach in which strategic, participatory communication was used to help achieve a deeper, coordinated alliance for the achievement of common goals and social benefits.

Austin et al. (2004b) explain five main dimensions of the partnering process. Building cross-sector bridges is the first dimension, which involves identifying motivations to collaborate (i.e., altruism versus utilitarianism), overcoming barriers, searching for an interlocutor or spokesperson, capitalizing on pre-existing relations, acknowledging different institutional capabilities and organizational cultures, and valuing effective communication. The second dimension is building alignment – to articulate a shared set of expectations and “that each partner individually examines how this potential collaboration fits into its organizational reality” (Austin et al., 2004c, p. 75). Value generation for companies and for communities through combining key resources is the third dimension (Austin et al., 2004d).

The fourth dimension is managing the relationship – institutionalizing the partnership

within member organizations and their stakeholders. It also entails promoting the role of internal and external communications, and resources to building trust among partners (Austin et al., 2004e). Finally, the fifth dimension, growth and innovation, consists of shared learning and knowledge to improve future interventions (Austin et al., 2004f). The partnership building literature explores the role of communication in general terms. This study attempts to make a contribution by exploring the role of strategic, participatory communication in creating and managing multi-sector partnerships.

Strategic and Participatory Communication

A multi-pronged approach is used to conceptualize the concept of strategic, participatory communication for social change and development in this study (Martinez & Kioussis, 2005). As a result, concepts and perspectives from the public relations and communication for development fields are resorted to in this effort. Smith (2005) defines strategic communication as “intentional communication undertaken by a business or non-profit organization. ... It has a purpose and a plan ... is based on research and subject to eventual evaluation” (p. 3). Similarly, a United Nations pocket guide for practitioners (2002) describes strategic communication as a function that “supports and promotes a management objective” (p. 3). At the same time “it takes a client-centered approach.” In other words, it is a “result-driven” and “audience-centered” process (United Nations, 2002: 3).

WordPress.com defines participatory communication as “the full involvement of

participants in communication processes and includes giving those individuals access to communication channels and enabling them to participate freely and equally in dialogue and debate” (n.p.) This concept is also defined as “participatory development communication” because of its close association with nation-building and social-marketing initiatives. Regarding the role of media, Adams (2006) states that participatory communication “no longer puts the emphasis on source and media, but on meaning and audiences... The people are involved in decision making, implementation and evaluation” (p. 172). This view represents a clear departure from the modern communication model, which emphasized asymmetrical communication and assumed a passive audience (Rogers, 1996), and instead recognizes the necessity for a more holistic and inclusive communication approach (Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002), that is more symmetrical (Grunig et. al, 1992) and introspective and reflective (Holström, 2002).

The notion of strategic communication is used in this research to refer to inter-organizational efforts that have as their goal to engage key constituencies, internal and external with the principal goal of achieving shared goals and objectives. Participatory communication provides members of a partnership with the communication mechanisms necessary to partake in the decision-making process and debate. Therefore, multi-sector partnerships, according to a strategic, participatory communication perspective, are the product of effective research, introspection, transparency, interaction, and creativity. In this study, these two ideas come together to denote those inter-organizational efforts that are the direct result

of, and the catalyst for, the empowerment of involved partners vis-à-vis an issue or situation, to form strategic partnerships for achieving collaborative strategic goals.

Drawing from the theoretical framework, the study addresses four research questions:

- RQ1:** How does a strategic, participatory communication process facilitate the dimensions of multi-sector partnership building for the Aburrá Valley?
- RQ2.** What are the strategies and tactics developed to support the Aburrá Valley’s multi-sector partnership?
- RQ3.** What are the factors that impact the development, implementation, and evaluation of the resulting strategic, participatory communication policies and plan?
- RQ4.** What are the main outcomes of the strategic, participatory communication plan of this multi-sector partnership?

METHODOLOGY

This case study uses a triangulation approach including unobtrusive, overt observation, depth-interviews, and textual analysis to explore the main research questions. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) explain: “a case study uses as many data sources as possible to systematically investigate individuals, groups, organizations, or events” (p. 136). An analysis of internal documents, as well as online and print communication materials produced by the multi-sector partners was conducted. Partnership’s documents also included the two strategic plans (North and South), evaluation reports, a consolidated communication plan, and meeting minutes.

Controlled and mediated tactics analyzed included websites, news releases, media coverage, newsletters, flyers, videos, and posters. A total of 68 internal and external official documents and communications were analyzed in this study. Additionally, 10 depth-interviews of an average length of 45 minutes with the partnership's leaders, as well as unobtrusive, overt observation during an alliance building workshop were conducted.

Depth-interviews were recorded and transcribed with consent of the participants. The questionnaire used for interviews with partnership leaders and members asked nine questions about: The role of strategic, participatory communication in the five dimensions of partnership building (i.e., cross-sector bridges, alignment, value generation, relationship management, and growth and innovation); the effects of the partnering process on the communication plan; strategies and tactics used; the role of the public relations professional; factors impacting the communication plan and policies; and finally outcomes of communication process (see Appendix A for a sample questionnaire). This study adopts Yin's (1994) explanation-building approach, which consists of the construction of a description and illustration about the phenomenon under investigation including causes, processes, and outcomes. The explanation is based on the theoretical framework chosen to inform the situation or place it in context. The research questions are answered by using findings from the various methods of data gathering. Only data from the observation and the interviews are cited in the findings section of this study.

A workshop organized by the Social Foundation was used for the unobtrusive, overt observation. The goal was to identify and describe the role of public relations professionals in building group support for the strategic and action plans. The researchers did not use any recording devices and disclosed their identity and purpose to workshop participants (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). A total of 15 participants and four facilitators (i.e., the director general of Social Foundation and two public relations professionals) were randomly assigned to three diverse round tables of five, four, and six participants respectively. Their objective was to discuss the strategic plans and create task-focused multi-sector partnerships. They were also asked to formulate and implement a series of action plans and projects. The workshop took place in Aburrá Valley South on November 24, 2006 and lasted five and a half hours, which included coffee breaks and lunch. Representatives from government (N = 5) and civic agencies (N = 3), education (N = 3), and business-sector organizations (N = 4) all participated in the workshop. Participants signed an informed consent form allowing the overt observation to be conducted. The first and third authors observed all three round tables discussions, took notes, and compare them soon after the closing of the workshop.

FINDINGS

This section provides a summary of the main findings from the analysis of the interviews with multi-sector partnership leaders in the North and South of the Aburrá Valley as well as the overt observation, texts,

and tactics that were part of this study. The findings of this study illustrate how strategic, participatory communication played a central role in bringing all multi-sector partners together for the common good of the Aburrá Valley. The pragmatic and symbolic character of communication was essential in the formative and maintenance stages of the multi-sector partnerships of Aburrá Valley. Strategic, participatory communication was used by public relations professionals from various types of organizations to deal with "egos", "personal agendas", and "cultural dissonance" among partners. The following sections summarize how strategic, participatory communication was used tactically to overcome the woes common to partnership building.

Role of Strategic, Participatory Communication Process in Facilitating the Dimensions of Multi-Sector Partnership Building

In general, as a participant says: "The communication plan allowed the gathering of the partners, as well as socializing and diffusing the planning process" (Depth interview, November 24, 2006). In specific, the findings in this section will be summarized according to the five main dimensions of the partnering process; that is, building cross-sector bridges, building alignment, value generation, managing the relationship, and growth and innovation.

Building Cross-Sector Bridges

At the beginning of the partnering process there was low involvement by various actors because of lack of knowledge about the goals

of this endeavor. That is, lack of commitment of potential actors of the partnership threatened the effectiveness of the communication plan. Filling the knowledge gap and balancing knowledge among potential partners take time and consistent communication. Thus, the feedback from potential partners and the larger community was gathered and this information was used to adjust the strategic communication plan (Depth interview, November 22, 2006).

The improved communication plan included formal correspondence and meetings among the leading partners, the Social Foundation, and the business-sector association of Aburrá North (Communication plan, 2005). Subsequently, oral presentations and individual meetings with each of the municipalities were scheduled. The municipalities first approached by the leading partners were those that, according to their current administrators, were more inclined to buy the multi-sector partnership concept to develop the strategic plans and execute priority projects (Depth interview, November 25, 2006).

A collective meeting was organized after partners achieved a greater understanding of the motivations of each potential partner, ways to address and overcome obstacles for collaboration, how to take advantage of pre-existing relationships and proclivity of selected members to be active components of the partnership. At the meeting the Social Foundation was introduced as headquarters and its director as the main spokesperson of the multi-sector partnership. In that meeting the initial communication policies and norms were clearly spelled out and the imbalance

and any differences among partners regarding organizational culture and resources were openly discussed as a comparative advantage rather than a barrier for the success of the partnership (Depth interview, November 21, 2006).

Building Alignment

Partners were encouraged to share the deliberations of the individual and collective meetings with their top administrators (Depth interview, November 21, 2006). The idea was for the partners to identify and analyze the congruence and appropriateness of the proposed multi-sector partnership's goals to their organizational goals and priorities. Interpersonal communication was essential in keeping the directors of the leading partners—Social Foundation and business association—informed of the internal discussions in each municipality. The leading partners visited each municipality to facilitate the discussions and clarify the ultimate goal of the proposed multi-sector partnership and how each municipality could take advantage of the collective efforts (Depth interview, November 22, 2006).

Value Generation

After bridges and alignment were built, the leading partners and the communication director of the multi-sector partnership hosted a collective meeting to announce the official installation of the partnership (Communication plan, 2006). Symbolic, non-legal binding agreements were prepared and signed by each partner. At the meeting, the leading partners and representatives of each municipality highlighted the benefits they expected as outcomes of this collaborative effort. The

meeting and statements were video-recorded, and then distributed among the partners. After the identification of the value generated by the partnership to each municipality and their communities, the partners discussed and reached an agreement on developing a visual identity of the multi-sector partnership (Depth interview, November 23, 2006). They commissioned a graphic designer to capture the common challenge and territory that were the subjects of the partnership building and development. Members were convinced that being part of a solid partnership with a clear visual identity would be an added value to their contributions, resource investment, and active participation (Depth interview, November 24, 2006).

Managing the Relationship

The heavy component of the communication plan was devoted to this dimension of the partnership building process (Depth interview, November 22, 2006). The leading partners and the partners representing each municipality and community groups provided input for the planning and production of each communication strategy and its tactics. The approval of communication materials, such as news releases and newsletters, were cumbersome, yet the active involvement of all the partners was the essence of the strategic, participatory communication plan (Depth interview, November 22, 2006).

Some partners were pressuring for greater publicity outputs. They were convinced that the publicity of the partnership actions and decisions were justifiable only to achieve specific objectives, such as rally the support of the various communities for specific events

related to the production and socialization of the strategic plans. The consistency of responses and the behaviors of the communication director and the leading partners encouraged partners to trust the communication process and its strategic aims (Depth interview, November 24, 2006). Above all, the leading partners' and communication director's reassurance and results of the strategic and participatory nature of the communication process helped to gain the support and compliance, with few and irrelevant exemptions, of the rest of the partners for the communication policies and procedures outlined in the plan. For instance, major announcements were disseminated to the media and larger community by the leading partners after the approval by the members of the multi-sector partnership.

Growth and Innovation

The leading partners and the communication director and her team kept all the records of the multi-sector partnership and its communication outputs and outcomes (e.g., qualitative and quantitative research). They are available to all of the partners (Depth interview, November 22, 2006). In addition, the communication director has written papers and presented them at local conferences of trade and academic institutions. These papers and presentations have been offered to all the partners upon request. Finally, the Social Foundation as one of the leading partners keeps the repository of the documents and communication materials used during the building and development of the multi-sector partnership. The action plans are being implemented as this case study is written. This manuscript will be disseminated among the partners as well.

Strategies and Tactics Developed to Support the Aburrá Valley's Partnership

Strategies and tactics include mediated and interpersonal/group communication, as well as mainstream and non-traditional/alternative media using a systematic and holistic approach (strategic) and engaging all partners in the process (participative). The main strategy was to place the community at the center of the process (Depth interview, November 22, 2006).

In March 2005, a public presentation was organized for both north and south communities on the beginning of the partnership and the future formulation of the plan. A leading public relations professional serving the partnership comments:

We suggested organizing a formal event (north first), but without following the strict protocol that is customary in Colombia. We wanted to be inclusive by giving equal participation time to each partner, avoiding it to become an official (government) event. (Depth interview, November 23, 2006)

The four mayors, a community leader, and a business leader were shown on a video expressing support for the future plan. They responded to the same question (*What is your commitment to the strategic plan?*) and roughly were given the same length of time to respond. The special event had a significant cultural component with the participation of community groups (each municipality was represented with autochthonous cultural expressions). The heavy cultural component was a point of contention. The departmental (state) official representative

wanted a more institutional and less popular, folkloric event. In the end, the rationale of promoting a participatory process with a greater presence of the community and the education nature of the speakers' intervention was upheld. The flags and other official symbols of the four municipalities were flown and a logo of the plan with an iconic representation of the Aburrá Valley (which includes North and South) was unveiled. A commitment accord was read and signed, which was more a symbolic act without legal implication.

"Commitment" was the key message repeated during the event. The objectives were: to make people aware of the future formulation of the strategic plan and to emphasize the participatory character of the process. Cultural expressions were a key component of the process since its insertion. The cultural component allowed an increased identification of the people with their region. Among the results reported by the partnership include that more than 600 people participated in the launch of the initiative (50% of invited guest from the community) and recorded testimonials from community leaders and partners demonstrated their enthusiasm and commitment with the plan.

A special event with similar objectives was held in the south. The cultural component was reduced to the minimum because the south zone does not have the richness of cultural expressions that the north has and the majority of the population is middle and upper class (three out of five municipalities). They did not want a popular event. They wanted more formality and sobriety. In contrast with the north, the south has less experience and tradition in developing partnerships to tackled

development and social issues because, in general, most of the municipalities act independently. That may be explained by the higher level of economic development and less need to work on partnerships or alliances.

In April 2005, the communication plan was finalized and later introduced to the partnership in May of the same year. The plan included four dimensions: visual identity to generate attention to the strategic plan and not individual partners, public information with an emphasis on alternative communitarian media, interpersonal communication, and lobbying.

Cultural events with the participation of local groups of musicians and dancers were used to introduce and communicate advancements of the strategic aspects of the plans to the larger communities. "The attendees became multipliers and advocates of the development process," says a participant (Depth interview, November 24, 2006).

A series of interactive workshops to discuss and work on the execution of priority areas of the plans are scheduled and coordinated by the Social Foundation periodically. The Foundation uses the partnership's budget and sponsorship of the business association to run the workshops. For instance, a typical workshop was led by public relations professionals along with representatives of the various sectors of the partnership. One of these workshops consisted of a summary of the strategic planning process and the identification of priority projects, and reading and review of basic documents with the elements of the partnering agreement. It

also included a discussion in small groups, a presentation of the summary analysis of their deliberations to the assembly, modification of the basic document, and crafting of follow-up agreements, which also identified funding sources (Overt observation, November 24, 2006). The workshop sessions are video recorded and photographed and notes taken for documentation and publicity purposes.

The organization of workshops with small round tables moderated by public relations professionals allowed great interactions among the partners. These workshops made it possible for partners to share knowledge they had about each other's organizations and resources as these pertaining to the strategic plans as well as the focalized multi-sector partnerships (Overt observation, November 24, 2006). Public relations professionals representing the main partners facilitated the discussion and consensus on the tone and terms to be included in agreements and the strategic and action plans. They also assisted in defining objectives and functions, commitments, responsibilities, and resources allocated or to be allocated by each partner.

FACTORS IMPACTING THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EVALUATION OF THE MULTI-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP'S COMMUNICATION POLICIES AND PLAN

This section summarizes factors that had the greatest impact, positive or negative,

on the various stages of development in the multi-sector partnership. The factors are identified as member agenda and characteristics, partnership communications, and environmental threats.

Member Agenda and Characteristics

Members brought with them unique individual/organizational agendas to the partnership. Viewpoints and agendas varied based on which sector the organization/leaders represented; socio-economic level communities/individuals belonged to as well as geographic location within the Aburrá Valley also influenced their overall goals. One interviewee mentioned how the unique interests by the business sector organizations in the North Valley areas served both as a catalyst for the formation as well as a challenge for the maintenance of the multi-sector partnership:

Every member of the partnership had their own personal/organizational interests involved. Business people from the Northern Aburrá Valley area made the first effort to develop de partnership. However, their initial intention was more to gain increased visibility for their organizations as well as their business association, which had been in operation for 25 years. They also sought to see their tax money at work in social programs and participate more fully in municipal life. (Depth interview, November 23, 2006)

Other partnership members also brought their unique interest to the table during the formation stage, as indicated in the following excerpt:

Municipal authorities became more active as a result of the high involvement level by the business sector. There was one municipal leader who was a greater visionary than the others, however. Municipal law forces authorities to focus entirely on their specific municipal affairs – there are no provisions or requirements in the law for regional efforts. This limitation in the law made their involvement in a regional initiative much more notable. Such involvement was only made possible by the participatory communication of the plan, which identified common needs and strengths among all the municipalities. (Depth interview, November 23, 2006)

Partnership Communications

Member's unique characteristics and capabilities were moderated to prevent one member of the partnership from becoming dominant. Strategic and participatory communication was the instrument used to prevent organizational hegemony and ensure equal participation and integration in the formation and functioning of the partnership. Regarding this delimiting character of the communication leader says:

Communication was used to disseminate common interests with great clarity. A partnership can fail because of the lack of social conscience and commitment. The purpose of communication was to produce a completely integrated partnership. Communication maintained the collaborative nature of the partnership and prevented any protagonist from emerging. (Depth interview, November 22, 2006)

Some potential threats to the partnership that could have emerged from the collaborative

nature of the endeavor were avoided by means of the "clarity, collaborative and transparent" nature of the communication process. By ensuring that all members of the partnership had a voice and participated in the decision making process about the purpose of the multi-sector partnership, a strategic impasse was trumped – the partnership was perceived as a "supra-municipal" entity, greater than the issues and needs of any individual locality.

"Participative communication strategies turned the community as a whole into the protagonist" in this process rather than giving center stage to elected officials or the business community (Depth interview, November 22, 2006). A heightened level of "co-responsibility" also resulted from the communicative process encouraging mayors of municipalities to transcend their local laws and engage issues and problems "in conjunction as a team." Such efforts "had never been seen before in the region."

A requirement for the approval of the logo for the multi-sector partnership was that it should be a stand-alone design that would only represent the common goals and strategies for the Aburrá Valley's plans. A challenge for the logo designer was to encapsulate those goals, but not link the design to any particular partner. The majority of the partners attributed the success of the design to the transparent communication process whereby the goals and objectives as well as communication strategies for the partnership were outlined. The success is evident in that it only took 20 minutes for members to cast a vote of approval for the logo. "The designer read the agreements for the partnership and the plans for the north and the south areas of the Aburrá Valley. He captured

the priorities set for the region without linking these to any particular members” (Depth interview, November 22, 2006).

A “shared vision” is another element that was considered by participants as a centerpiece of the success of this partnership. “The diffusion of the plan, its strategies and desired outcomes as elaborated within a framework of the entire region (both north and south of the valley), provided the population with a shared vision and an accompanying language that allowed them to communicate about this initiative for development as one that was their own” (Depth interview, November 23, 2006).

Institutional pride often got in the way of further developing the partnership. However, the transparent and participatory nature of the communication processes involved made it possible for organizations to see the benefit of putting aside their organizational pride and culture and favor the common goals that were made manifest by the communication process. One participant explains: “They feared losing control of their resources. For example, it took one year to agree on how the resources would be allocated. It became an imperative to create an identity of the process” (Depth interview, November 23, 2006).

Environmental Threats

Environmental factors that threatened the partnership during the early and mid-point stages included the geographic landscape of the Aburrá Valley, cultural and socio-economic differences among members, lack of previous experiences with partnership building experiments, and the supremacy of the City of Medellín in the region among others.

The very purpose of the multi-sector partnership would prevent Medellín from taking center stage in the decision-making process. Medellín historically has represented the center of wealth and industrial progress in the region and this new community-building effort pursued a new politico-economic model that would offer the entire region access to shared wealth and opportunity: “The Medellín administration cannot be imposed as was the case in the past. The multi-sector partnership, through its clear and shared goals and objectives, which were facilitated by the participatory communication process made it possible for the member municipalities to make demands of more support from Medellín with its socio-economic development agenda” (Depth interview, November 22, 2006). Historically Medellín had played a centralized role in the planning of the Aburrá Valley. However, with this new, decentralized and participatory decision-making process each of the 10 municipalities were responsible for their own planning and Medellín played more of a supportive role.

MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE STRATEGIC, PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION PLAN

In the end, the most significant outcomes—a shared vision of the future and the definition of key projects to achieve a harmonious development of the region—were realized among the partners and the various communities of the 10 municipalities of the Aburrá Valley (Depth interview, November 22, 2006). The process carried out by an integrated multi-sector partnership through

strategic, participatory communication made the community to be the protagonist. The common citizen felt a fundamental part of the process, which was expressed in qualitative and quantitative data gathered by the public relations professionals working for the Social Foundation.

Communities responded and adopted the participatory model of the planning process because, to a great extent, "they are the ones facing major needs and would be the greater beneficiaries of the partnership's plans and actions" (Depth interview, November 24, 2006). They adopted the plan and actively participated in events and town meetings to provide their feedback as an essential component of the project. Today, communities reject government plans concerning community development about which they are not consulted. Key messages on community participation seem to have ignited and empowered greater civic engagement in public affairs and economic development among the citizens of the nine municipalities. "Government agencies are adopting the strategic, participatory communication model to manage their community interventions" (Depth interview, November 23, 2006). The various sectors appear to now feel an ownership over development plans of their communities, which demand their active participation.

The business community became more active and understood that the communication plan was aimed to make the partnership efficient and effective, more than focusing on publicity and promotion of their organizations. "Their interest has increased because they are now aware of the partnership's results as

collaborative efforts among various sectors" (Depth interview, November 24, 2006).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Results demonstrate the role that strategic, participatory communication played in building and developing this multi-sector partnership in Colombia. Clear implications are evident for the five dimensions of the partnering process. These include, building cross-sector bridges, building alignment, generating value, managing relationships, and encouraging growth and innovation. This process of multi-sector partnering would have been much more difficult without a systematic communication component that incorporated transparency, consistency, permanency, and openness. These are general qualities that were achieved as a result of the identification of common goals and interests and the acceptance of individual motivations of the partners to be active participants in the process. Emphasis on common mechanisms and expressions of communication, abiding policies and procedures as well as trust in the leadership of the NGO and the business sector association all lead to these successful results.

These results seem to encourage the use of strategic, participatory communication at two distinct levels. Firstly, emphasis on direct communication (i.e. interpersonal and group communication) is most valuable during the first three dimensions of the partnering process – building bridges and alignment and generating value for each partner. At a second level, it seems that controlled and mediated communications become essential

as the partnership is established and begins operations. There was the need to get the larger communities involved. At both communication levels an active involvement of the partners is necessary.

Strategic communication refers to informed and purposeful efforts that engage key constituencies with the principal goal of identifying and achieving shared goals and objectives. The term participatory communication is used to denote the open system for deliberation that provides all partnership members, regardless of their social-economic status and cultural idiosyncrasies, with an opportunity and set of capabilities to solve problems and ameliorate situations.

Strategic, participatory communication was used by the multi-sector partnership to build cross-sector bridges. Research efforts that sought to identify common needs, knowledge gaps, socialization of goals, as well as values and benefits for partners individually and collectively are representative of such communication efforts. Additionally, the use of multiple direct and mediated communication mechanisms (i.e. member correspondence, oral presentations, meetings, newsletters, open forums, special events) to reach diverse potential members is also an example of the strategic and participatory element in this dimension of multi-sector partnership formation.

Building partnership also involved a great degree of strategy and participatory behavior on the part of member organizations and their corresponding leaders. The emphasis in this dimension was mostly on exposing partners to

the common and diverse needs of the different municipalities. For this purpose, many visits were made to individual municipalities by leaders of for-profit, nonprofit organizations integrating the partnership as well as leaders of communities and the NGO, and public institutions. The idea was that first-hand exposure to the situation and issues facing these municipalities would create a shared experience among the leadership and a concerted effort would emerge to deal with these issues.

Value generation took the previous dimension to the next level. It relied on strategic, participatory communication in the form of "non-binding" agreements to institutionalize the individual and aggregate benefits to be reaped from the multi-sector partnership. Video recording of meetings were distributed municipalities that highlighted the municipal benefits that would result from the partnership. This visual process of generating value for all parties involved culminated with the collaborative process of creating a multi-sector partnership logo that would depict their goals and benefits for all actors. The final product could not be associated with any of the partnering organizations large or small, nor with any specific areas of the region, municipalities or individuals. The process was transparent, open, and inclusive.

Perhaps the dimension that required most strategic participation was managing the relationships between partners that culminated in the multi-sector partnership. Interpersonal, group, and mediated communication tactics were utilized to manage the relationships between partners since the early stages of this

enterprise. Despite the heavy reliance on publicity outputs to inform members and the community as a whole about the multi-sector partnership activities, much energy was also invested into meetings, discussions, and workshops to ensure a two-way communication existed between the communities and the leading members. Most communication strategies and tactics at this stage, including publicity efforts were generated with input from diverse members, communities, and as a result of the open, participatory process facilitated in the partnership's policies and guidelines.

Finally, growth and innovation is also incorporated through an informed, targeted and deliberative process. The information gathered, the strategies and tactics developed, critical communication policies and plans were disseminated to all municipalities and their corresponding leadership as a mechanism to share knowledge. However, what makes this effort to share and grow knowledge and consequently to stimulate innovation is the provision of a feedback loop. The meetings, workshops, website and newsletter, among other tactics, all serve to open the communication process for all. In summary, the interlocking of organizational missions, strategies-synchronization, and values-compatibility were also achieved as key components of the integrative stage of the collaboration continuum.

A greater understanding of the roles that strategic, participatory communication plays in multi-sector partnership formation enriches the body of knowledge of public relations. Because of the original purpose of this study – to illustrate the partnering process

from a communication perspective – this theoretical framework did not include public relations theories such as co-orientation and relationship building strategies and outcomes. However, the value of both theories is evident in the partnering process and it is suggested that they are incorporated in future studies. This study will be used in follow-up research to develop a typology of indicators to assess the communication performance of the partnering process and build a theory of strategic, participatory communication for multi-sector partnership building and development. The typology of indicators as predictors of success or effectiveness must be validated and tested in various contexts, situations and types of multi-sector partnerships.

The results of this study could serve as point of comparison with other multi-sector partnerships in diverse national or regional environments. In fact, African, Asian, Eastern European, and Latin American countries are experiencing somewhat comparable socioeconomic and political environments that require the intervention of multi-sector partnerships. Moreover, developed countries are also facing challenges because of the complexity of their societies that required the intervention of such multi-sector partnerships.

A limitation of the qualitative method used to gather primary data for this case study is the possibility that as rapport and comfort level developed between the interviewer and interviewees, the interviewer may have unintentionally communicated information or nonverbal cues that biased the participants' responses.

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