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Evaluating the Impact of Social Change Catalyst on Urban Community Development: A Case Study of LIN Center for Community Development in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam by Chau Doan-Bao

Irene Ayallo

In this thesis, the author evaluates the impact of the Listen – Inspire – Nurture (LIN) Center’s model of participatory urban community development in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). It evidences how LIN has supported urban not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) to alter their self-perception from ‘charity organisations’ to being part of community development processes. Using a participatory communication approach, LIN has encouraged dialogue with and among stakeholders and provided robust information to the community. Consequently, NPOs have become more confident in their own capacities and have more stable financial support. In addition, the corporate sector has a better understanding of the not-for-profit sector and is making a stronger contribution to the development of NPOs in HCMC. These outcomes contribute to effective and sustainable community development in HCMC. However, LIN still faces challenges including difficulty in applying Western concepts of urban community development to the Vietnamese context. Some NPOs struggle to understand Western community development correctly, and therefore do not understand the role of LIN. Furthermore, Vietnamese culture is influenced by ‘power distance’, which can significantly impact on achieving equitable dialogue with and among NPOs. Accordingly, this thesis proposes a revised social-change catalyst model for urban community development in Vietnam.

This is a well-researched, solutions-focused and skillfully written thesis. It begins from the premise that social-change catalysts play an important role in helping people take ownership of their lives and gradually become critical change agents in their urban communities; and that communication for social change provokes collective actions to solving common problems. The thesis is divided into six chapters, which are chronologically and thematically ordered:

CHAPTER ONE

The Introduction sets the thesis in a wider context. The socio-political and cultural context of HCMC is discussed, highlighting some of the major social problems facing its populations. This discussion gives readers insight into this community, and demonstrates the need for urban community development. The author notes that before the launch of LIN, there were 18 registered and more than 200 non-registered NPOs working in community development in HCMC. However, their work was not effective, mainly because of a lack of coordination. LIN has been able to establish a network for these NPOs to work together through a participatory communication approach. A participatory approach requires a major shift of mind-set and the development of critical consciousness in stakeholders in order for them to have the capacity to challenge dominant views in policy making and programme management.

CHAPTER TWO

The Literature Review includes an extensive discussion on aspects of communication for development and social change. The author offers a well-founded critique of the modernisation and dependency models of communication respectively. Doan-Bao argues that the development process of Western countries has been used as the prescriptive model for developing countries, and has failed to address inequality or effectively solve other social issues. This critique provides a strong case for a contextual participatory model of communication, as utilised by LIN. However, Doan-Bao notes that participatory communication as a method is not without fault. Some practitioners have argued that participatory processes are still dominated by elites. In addition, the approach is difficult to adapt to different areas. LIN's implementation of a participatory model of communication in terms of this critique is discussed in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER THREE

The Research Design and Methodology section presents an in-depth discussion on the theoretical and practical aspects of the research methodology and methods, including the process of recruitment, which was carried out through LIN's networks in HCMC. Grounded within an "integrated model for measuring the process of applying the participatory communication approach and its outcomes," the author conducted ethnographic non-participant observations, in-depth semi-structured interviewing, and collected secondary data. Doan-Bao spent four weeks observing how LIN and local NPOs planned and operated communication activities, and how NPOs interacted with LIN through these channels. In addition, 18 participants were

interviewed (including eight LIN staff, nine NPO representatives, and three skilled volunteers). Thematic analysis was used to present, organise, describe and examine collected data.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the Findings section a summary was made of data collected under three sections. The first includes staff thoughts on how LIN's strategic priorities have impacted on their work with stakeholders. The second consists of NPO representatives' reflections on participating in LIN's capacity-building programmes, receiving community funds, and LIN's impact on their NPOs. The third consists of responses from skilled volunteers. A table summarising participants' responses is included under each section. The main findings are that LIN is the first NPO in HCMC to conceive of and apply the idea of an NPO network; that LIN works towards creating strong connections between itself and NPOs through a horizontal network; and that LIN is the first NPO to introduce the skilled volunteering concept to the public, especially to professionals in the corporate sector.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Discussion and Analysis section presents an analysis of the findings outlined in Chapter Four. The author discusses three main points in this chapter. The first of these is the important role that LIN has as a catalyst in communication for social change and its influence on the sector. Doan-Bao observes that LIN has performed the role of catalyst through capacity enhancement programmes, their Narrow the Gap community fund, and a community partnership initiative. Through these initiatives, LIN has provided NPOs with the resources to develop and become more confident in their community work. This is significant, given that NPOs in urban areas rarely received support from local authorities and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) due to the assumption that they have higher standards of living and stronger economic development. Because these NPOs were running themselves, they lacked long-term strategies, suitable financial resources and strong networks. These gaps hindered their effective involvement in community development.

Secondly, the author provides an analysis of LIN's impact on community development in HCMC and considers the barriers and challenges LIN faces. Seven indicators are used to measure LIN's impact: influence on leadership, degree and equity of participation, information equity, collective self-efficacy, sense of ownership, social cohesion, and social norms. Doan-Bao argues that LIN's impact on these issues is mostly 'medium', except social cohesion which is noted to be weak:

1. LIN has gained the respect and trust of its NPO network because of its contextual leadership style, described as 'referent power' (which gains the respect and trust of others) and 'reward power' (which comes from the leader's ability to provide valuable things). LIN is also trusted because of its interpersonal approach to communication. The challenge is that most NPOs still depend on LIN instead of working by themselves.

2. LIN retains an open policy in regards to its NPO network membership, making it easy for NPOs to join and participate. However, LIN's capacity enhancement programmes tend to be very general, offering the same training for all NPOs. Doan-Bao argues that this is a challenge because NPOs have different needs, and are at different levels of development. LIN should therefore offer training that caters for this variety/diversity among NPOs. Participation is also hindered by the wholesale application of Western concepts of community development in the Vietnamese context.
3. Because of the participatory approach to communication, the free flow of information from LIN to NPOs is strong. But this is hampered by the complicated language used by LIN, a problem stemming from the employment of Western concepts of community development.
4. NPOs indicated that because of the support of LIN, they are more confident in themselves and can even work with other organisations, including the cooperate sector, to enhance the quality of their projects. However, the author observes that performance in this area is still weak because of the loose connection among NPOs.
5. The author observes that any NPO's sense of ownership is dependent on its level of participation in developmental stages, and that LIN needs to take this into consideration.
6. There is only a loose connection among NPOs, therefore cohesion between them is weak. A major contributing factor to this is that the government does not want NPOs to connect and work together because they are afraid that such a connection will lead to a powerful anti-government group.
7. LIN has successfully turned two terms (non-profit organisation and skilled volunteer) into recognised concepts and norms in the community development sector, particularly in the circle of LIN stakeholders.

Thirdly, the research proposes a revised catalyst model for urban community development to address the factors, identified in this chapter, hindering its impact. Three elements are required for this model to be effective: a leadership strategy for the catalyst and NPOs; contextual understanding (regarding local context and stakeholder characteristics); and a suitable impact-evaluation framework grounded in the local context for the whole communication process. The author observes that because of the socio-political context, where NPOs tend to depend on the catalyst rather than work by themselves and feel hesitant about providing feedback to the catalyst, LIN should enhance its 'power of purpose'. LIN needs to categorise NPOs into different groups based on their working characteristics and needs. This will save time and resources and also support NPOs to embrace their own leadership. Moreover, LIN should enhance its understanding of the local context. Doan-Bao argues against the use of Western concepts and community-development language in the Vietnamese socio-cultural context. In addition, to create effective social impact, it is vital that a catalyst contextualises its communication approaches. Finally, the author argues that

LIN should develop a professional evaluation framework to measure its impact on community development, and suggests that this evaluation be done from the beginning and not just at the end.

Based on evidence and discussions in this thesis, Doan-Bao concludes that LIN, as a local NPO, is a suitable catalyst in communication for social change based on the conditions of urban communities in Vietnam, especially HCMC.

The findings of this study parallel other research into urban community development, particularly in developing countries. Community development in urban areas presents both opportunities and challenges. The challenges are well documented, including complex populations and social issues. The context is substantially different from that of rural areas, where community development has most often been focused. Cities such as HCMC are not a community as such – they are characterised by heterogeneous populations, competing groups, widespread disparities of income, informal, impersonal relationships, and relatively high spatial and class mobility. In such contexts, communication for social change, which involves listening to community opinions, creating dialogue within community, adapting messages from various levels of community members' knowledge, and providing leadership, may provoke collective actions to solve common problems. Extant literature has mainly documented the impact of organisations working in rural community development. The role and impact of social change catalysts in urban community development is under researched, even within the field of communication for social change. This thesis makes a significant contribution to the literature in this area of study.

This thesis demonstrates an excellent understanding of the subject area. It documents the impact of LIN as a catalyst in communication for social change in the community-development sector in HCMC and Vietnam as a whole.

LOCATING THE THESIS

This thesis can be located within communication studies, communication for social change studies, and urban community development studies.

POTENTIAL PUBLICATION IMPACT OF THE THESIS

This thesis would make a significant contribution to communication for social change research, particularly within the areas of urban community development.

PRIMARY SOURCES

The author conducted ethnographic non-participant observations, 18 semi-structured interviews and collected secondary data.

AUTHOR

Irene Ayallo, (PhD, MTh, PGDip Theology, CoP Social Justice, BDiv) is of Kenyan descent. She has been living in Auckland, New Zealand since 2006. Irene's research interests include gender (the empowerment of young women), politics (political theories, political participation, social justice, and human rights), HIV/AIDS prevention, spirituality, political theology, community development and research with marginalised groups. Irene is a lecturer in the Department of Social Practice, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand.