

Volunteering in Communication Commission WSF 2011 Dakar

Narrative report

Time frame: 18.02. - 15.03.

Name: Andrea Müller-Frank

Context

One month before the Forum, I received a positive response to my application as a volunteer from the Secretary of the African Forum and I joined the organizing team. Initially interested in supporting visibility of local concerns and movements at the forum, I realized during my first COMCOM meeting (19.02) that many tasks, concerning the general communication of the Forum, were far from being accomplished.

I noticed that most of the local people, to whom I talked, were not aware about the forum. Those who did hear about it in the media perceived it as a giant conference far above local people.

Publicity spots for local media: Creating key messages two weeks before the forum

I assisted the Sub-committee, working on radio and TV spots, to organize working sessions and collaborated with Didier Awadi's Studio Sankara. In the first working session a draft was formulated. Surprisingly, in the next one, two days later we had to go a step backwards and produce terms of references (tor), which incorporated key messages for the production of publicity spots.

Group members invested lots of energy in the formulation of tor and spots: Within 72 hours, we recorded the first spots together with some international radio-activists at Studio Sankara. Validation and small changes took another two days. Then the spots in Wolof and French were completed.

Production of TV spot was much easier. Based on the radio spots, Studio Sankara elaborated a first version, which was then reworked with representatives of the local and international Communication Commission. In that way images from earlier forums could be integrated.

I felt that my presence in the process was important for ensuring an inclusive work dynamic also incorporating international volunteers even in the context of high time pressure situation.

Main challenges:

Time delay and participatory work culture

I was astonished that formulation of terms of references only happened two weeks before the forum and that no outline of key messages ("evaluator speech")

was available. This surely was a reason, why some group members and other volunteers had only basic knowledge concerning the forum. Also the elitists image which local media created in the run-up of the Forum can be related to a missing communication strategy.

A challenge during the work process was that people seemed not to be used to work according to participatory work principles. I had the impression that the predominant work attitude by coordinators and group members restrained the potential of group dynamics. This sort of work attitude, surely accelerated by the big time delay, was articulated in the production of flyers, which were not approved by a participatory work process.



Missing coordination and information flow

After the group had produced and validated the spots within a few days, it was frustrating that it took another week before they were distributed to the media. Support and deployment by the coordination were weak.

Another challenge for the local communication work was the information flow between group members of the international and local COMCOM. The local committee had little awareness concerning communication documents at the international level, e.g. the international press kit. The use of opensfm as an information sharing tool was not practice sufficiently.

Targeting local media: Strong collaboration with community radios and appeal for a local press kit

The very good coverage of the Forum in the local community radios can be seen as a big success of the work of the COMCOM. Radios diffused many live debates at which radio listeners could actively participate. This was very well perceived. Taking into account the height of

importance of radios in Senegalese context the impact of this can be highly estimated.

However, I was astonished that a press kit, targeting local media, was not foreseen in the media planning.

Lessons learned:

- Active facilitation of participatory working processes. Deployment of permanent facilitators.
- Better use of opensfm as a means of exchange of documents and on work process.
- Timely formulation of communication strategy: Especially key messages/ elevator speech for the Forum, approval and circulation amongst Commission members and volunteers.
- Timely formulation of terms of references for media/ communications work
- Timely production and distribution of press kits also targeting local media (integrating a list of resource persons and interview topics)

Involvement of local volunteers and journalists in publicity works: A lost opportunity

Besides the CESTI, PANOS, IPS, Terraviva partnership, collaboration and use of local volunteers was low. Even though during the Forum students and local journalists were part of the media team, their involvement in publicity works in the run-up of the Forum was a lost opportunity. Students of journalism and related disciplines did attend COMCOM work sessions, but were sufficiently implicated. Two weeks before the Forum one student raised her voice warning: "Students are not aware about the forum; they don't know what it is."

In the last week, efforts to converge local volunteers with international journalists – especially CIRANDA and also IMC - failed. International journalists attended the last COMCOM meeting on February the 2nd, to exchange about ways of communicating the Forum. They only learned during the session that their meeting with local communication volunteers was cancelled. This problem was due to missing communication/coordination.

Lessons learned

- Communication planning should integrate activities for local journalists and volunteers to cover preparation process and public information. (Action research, use of open source and social media to ensure decentralised local & international communication)
- Preparation of partnerships between international journalists and local communication volunteers in the communication planning.



Website

The integration into and visibility of local communication in the media section of the website (<http://fs-m2011.org/en/press/view>) was problematic. The collaboration was hampered by the absence of proactive facilitation.

Another problem existed with regards to content of the Virtual Media Centre, which was predominantly in Portuguese.

Lessons learned

- Ensure facilitation of content management. Deploy a permanent facilitator.

Press centre: Lack of common messages

The communication of common messages continued to be a problem during the Forum, as the organisation of the press-work in the media-centre was not pursued in a proactive manner. Daily briefings/strategy meetings of the COMCOM and the presence of commission members and volunteers on-site and were weakly organised. Further, press releases and published articles were not exposed and shared.

Even though press conferences were held for the organisers, explanations, for example on organization problems were relinquished to individual journalists.

Lessons learned:

- Daily briefings and strategy meetings for COMCOM members should be held to ensure proactive press work
- Presence of COMCOM volunteers in the media centre should be organised.