

The advent of social media and Web 2.0 has democratized how citizens interact with people in power, be it members of parliament, donor organizations, international bodies, civil society and the media. Social media tools have paved the way for citizens to build a “personal” relationship with their rulers and their peers. These tools allow everyone – those in power and the normal citizens - to create and share content and add value to the political, social and economic debate.

Those reading this article know very well that Web 2.0 started as a massive social experiment. Today we've gone beyond the experiment. Social media and Web 2.0 are now part and parcel of our daily lives and thanks to this revolution, citizens in urban and rural areas are in an unprecedented position to have their voices heard!

Last February 2010 I had the honour and pleasure of [talking with CNN's anchor and correspondent, Jim Clancy](#) on how social media has changed mainstream media. During our conversation, Clancy pointed out that mainstream journalists use social media to “mine” information and to “get the temperature”.

Over the last months, we've seen how citizens in countries where social media tools are banned have found inventive ways of sharing their message with the outside world. We have also seen that [restrictions on the export of technology related to the use of internet-based communication have been lifted](#) in the US to boost free flow of information in Iran, Sudan and Cuba. Since these tools are open and accessible, they've become a catalyst for transparency and accountability. And thanks to their egalitarian nature the farmers in rural areas, just like the urban activists in capitals have the same opportunity to have their voices heard.

Social media is allowing development workers to capture in real time emerging needs and trends and at the same time allows development workers to disseminate their messages and appeals in real time. A case in point is the appeals via Twitter for the devastating earthquake in Haiti.

At the same time, more and more development organizations are using a variety of social media tools to report live from events and to solicit comments and feedback. For example, last month, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), used a number of social media tools and social reporting methodology to report live from the [third global meeting of the Farmers' Forum and the thirty-third session of its Governing Council](#)

. IFAD's social reporting team, composed of 10 volunteers, attended the various sessions and brought the meeting live to those who could not attend, through

[Twitter](#)

,
[photography](#)

,
[videos](#)

and through

[IFAD's social reporting blog](#)

Together with Clancy who moderated a high-level panel discussion on "[From summit resolutions to farmers' fields: Climate change, food security and smallholder agriculture](#)", the IFAD's social reporting team solicited questions via Twitter, which Clancy then fielded to the panellists and the audience, one from

[@mobimonkey](#)

and another from

[@mongkolroek](#)

For me, IFAD's social reporting experience demonstrated how social media tools contribute to giving development a new participatory approach which goes beyond just words but is rooted in action.

If yesterday, we only needed to engage with governments and with grass-root communities, today, we have to engage with all those who wish to engage with us and have something to say. What has changed is that as development workers we have to continuously and consistently be "listening" to what people have to say.

Before the advent of social media, we could have afforded brushing off comments made in third-tier media. Today it is hard to ignore a farmer's organisation blogpost or a comment on Twitter, because ignoring a comment or an observation can have a negative snowball effect. This means we need to be equipped to deal with feedback and criticism in a constructive and timely manner. This also means that today more than ever, development is a joint effort and there is an extended development community which includes all actors and most importantly the people who we serve and need to reach.

I believe that if international and development organizations fail to embrace social media they will become irrelevant in no time. We not only need to have our ears on the "social media tools" to hear and see what others are saying about us, about our partners and stakeholders, but also have to use these tools to influence policies, to set trends, advocate for eradicating rural poverty and advocate for smallholder farmers and the poor rural people whom we serve.

In concluding, I believe that social media is perhaps one of the greatest allies of development workers. Today we can get our messages out immediately through Twitter and through blogs. Our PowerPoint presentations are available on tools such as Slideshare, photos from our projects and programmes are readily available through Picasa and Flickr and everyone can see our achievements and challenges through our videos available on YouTube and Blip TV. At the same time, we have the opportunity to hear first hand and listen in real-time to issues and challenges as they emerge. We are in a position to get FIRST HAND information. We need to harness all this wealth of knowledge to fulfil our mandate of eradicating rural poverty and

ensuring food security for all.

Author: Roxanna Samii

Manager, Web, Knowledge and Internal Communications

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

r.samii@ifad.org

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/rsamii> , <http://twitter.com/ifadnews>

Blog: <http://rsamii.blogspot.com>, <http://ifad-un.blogspot.com>

Blip.Tv: <http://ifad.blip.tv>

Picasa: <http://picasaweb.google.com/ifad.photolibrary>