

# What Do You See? Research on Visual Communication Design to Promote Positive Change for Unorganized Workers in Karnataka, India

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**Abstract** The principal objective of this paper is to indicate the role of inclusive visual communication design in development. This case study shows the research on semiotics with Unorganized Workers in a rural context in Karnataka. It demonstrates how images have to be specific to its cultural context to create awareness and stimulate positive change among mostly illiterate participants in a rural context. It demonstrates the learnings: a strategic approach of communication and the specific design and use of visual media as a tool to create awareness and stimulate positive change. These examples are relevant for social designers and people who deal with complex social problems and communication4development in a joint project involving several stakeholders and government agencies.

**Keywords** Visual communication design · Visual communication4development · Behaviour change communication · Unorganized workers · Social security schemes

## 1 Social Security and the Information Gap

An improved social security system is crucial to alleviating poverty and to advancing inclusive economic growth. Many social security programmes in India, such as health insurance and old-age pensions, are limited to workers in the organised sector. Yet more than 94 % of the country's workforce is engaged in the unorganised sector, in small-scale farming, and in small businesses. Breman [1] states, that “the informal economy consists of all activity generating work and employment that is not registered and administered by public regulation” with no protection against arbitrary dismissal, accidents and other risks. Thus unorganized workers are extremely vulnerable.

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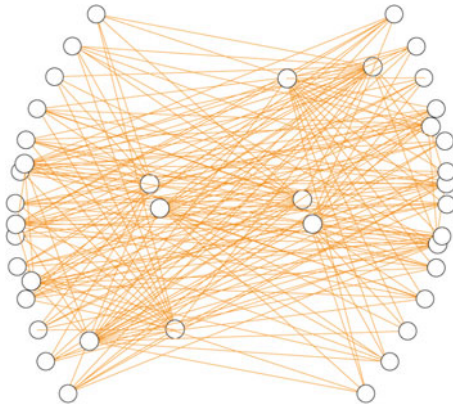
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**Fig. 1** A multiplicity of schemes both at the central and state levels aiming at social protection of the underprivileged have been framed at random at various points of time, which makes it in general difficult to understand who can benefit from which scheme. Design: Sabina von Kessel

The Indian government has set up at various points of time a multiplicity of schemes which aim to ensure that the vulnerable sections of the population have access to basic entitlements, such as food and nutrition, housing and health, education and employment, etc.

The problem is that there is no overall conformity and design of those schemes and a lack of consistent policy and the coverage of unorganized workers under the schemes has been minuscule. Unorganized workers have generally no information about their entitlements and therefore no access to pensions, healthcare or other forms of social security. For Government stakeholders it is also difficult to understand who can benefit from which scheme (Fig. 1).

In Karnataka, information about and access to these schemes has been made easier by the Cooperation between the Department of Labour in Karnataka, in collaboration with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Since 2008 unorganized workers have access to efficient and improved social security services via newly established worker facilitation centres (WFCs) in five districts in Karnataka. Community facilitators (CF) have surveyed and identified beneficiaries and have offered easier access to social security schemes through a Single-Window-Service (SWS) in a pilot project, which has been taken over by the Department of Labour, Government of Karnataka in recent month.

In spite of the efforts made by the GIZ, there is still a lack of information and awareness about Social Security Schemes within the society in general and the Unorganized Workers and Government stakeholders in particular.

None of the Unorganized Workers, we interviewed at random in different districts, had heard of any social security schemes or knew that they were entitled to benefit from various schemes. On the other hand, all of the beneficiaries who had obtained their “cards” (benefits), got these only through Interpersonal Communication with the Community Facilitator in the Single-Window-Service Centres,

established by the GIZ. There were no other forms of communication, which reached the participants other than interpersonal communication. Visual communication was either missing, did not reach the participants or simply did not use a visual language which communicated successfully with participants, who in their majority are illiterate.

### 1.1 Every Picture Tells a Story

This chapter reviews the key questions of visual communication design and visual semiotics in relation to the participants and the cultural context.

Using visual communication to stimulate positive change and promote development goals has a long tradition. UNICEF states that C4D, “Communication for development goes beyond providing information. C4D involves understanding people, their beliefs and values, the social and cultural norms that shape their lives. It involves engaging communities and listening to adults and children as they identify problems, propose solutions and act upon them. Communication for development is seen as a two-way process for sharing ideas and knowledge using a range of communication tools and approaches that empower individuals and communities to take actions to improve their lives” [2].

Though the statistics clearly show that illiteracy is a significant global and local issue and even today among ten in India about four are illiterate, very little has been done to tackle the challenge of communicating to illiterate people in general and, more specifically to an illiterate rural population, to which Unorganized Workers in their majority belong. The repercussions of an inability to communicate to and with them are demonstrated here (Fig. 2).

There has been very little research on and how participants in rural environments in India read and understand visuals, which are mostly created by design offices in cities for participants but not in communication with them. Visual images, like all

**Fig. 2** This illiterate unorganized worker in Hoskote (rural Bangalore) is not able to understand the brochure, provided by GIZ/ Dol. Photo Sabina von Kessel





**Fig. 3** Painted agricultural trailers from Rajasthan (*left*) and Karnataka (*right*) show a significant different visual language. Photos Sabina von Kessel

representations, are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality...“they represent for us: that is, they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it” [3].

Our interpretation of symbols and graphic language depends greatly on our cultural language. There is very little uniformity between different cultures. Evamy [4] states that “it is a great misconception to assume that graphic information becomes magically accessible to everyone, everywhere when you remove words” (Fig. 3).

Visual communication in India is unique in the fact that it reflects its cultural context and social patterns extremely accurately. A vernacular visual language in signs, graphic, photographic and audio visual information depicts wealth, caste, class, religion, ethnicity on billboards, wall paintings and signs in public places, TV shows and film posters.

These images are successful because they reflect existing cultural norms and attitudes prevalent in Indian society.

As Art historian Keith Moxey argues: “Semiotics makes us aware that the cultural values with which we make sense of the world are a tissue of conventions that have been handed down from generation to generation by the members of the culture of which we are a part. It reminds us that there is nothing ‘natural’ about our values; they are social constructs that not only vary enormously in the course of time but differ radically from culture to culture. It reminds us that there is nothing ‘natural’ about our values: they are social constructs that not only vary enormously in the course of time but differ radically from culture to culture” [5].

## ***1.2 Visual Literacy and the Process of Sensemaking***

This chapter looks at the ‘visual’ age and the meaning of ‘visual literacy’.

Humans have always created images, in fact for a much longer period of time than they were able to read and write. We live in a “visual” age, in an increasingly

visual world, in which we are constantly looking at screens of different sizes with superior resolutions at handheld devices. We also live in a world with more data available to us than ever before. IBM says that 90 % of the world's data was produced only in the last 2 years and that we produce 2.5 quintillion bytes of data daily.

After centuries of the predominance of the alphabet, the contemporary culture relies not so much on thinking and communication, but on image modes. Nowadays the ability to read and write is dominated by the ability to decode images as sources of information.

In a growing world of visualizations, our brains understand images faster than they do text.

The use of images as sources of information and learning demand new abilities in the global world. These new abilities, coined Visual Literacy have transformed our ways to communicate and to decode communication. Children with access to digital technologies learn an image-based use of language and become visually literate at a very early age.

“Youths who spend a third of their waking hours in front of a screen are saturated with images. The ubiquity of images in young people's lives has transformed the way they learn and perceive the world” [6].

The majority of people in India has not yet got access to the internet and there is a huge digital divide between the “flat world, in which you can plug and play, collaborate and connect, if you are from Bangalore or Brooklyn, your life chances and opportunities hold more potential than ever before” [7] and the realities of Indian people (Fig. 4).

In India, internet penetration in the country is a mere 10.2 % (December 2011) [8], but lately being fueled by the ever growing popularity of smart phones.

In 2014 India will be holding the largest proportion of smartphones sold to new users. A smartphone explosion is expected with China (283m) followed by India (225m).



**Fig. 4** A painter from Hoskote and a construction worker from Mangalore show their simple cellphones. The majority of unorganized workers in Karnataka use cellphones only to make phone calls. They hardly use other functions, like SMS. Photos, collage: Sabina von Kessel

Though India is becoming the second-largest country for smartphone use in the world, it seems that the majority of the population in India is until today not able to decode the abstract global sign system.

### 1.3 The Research: What Do You See?

What is the use of a book' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations.' Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* [9]

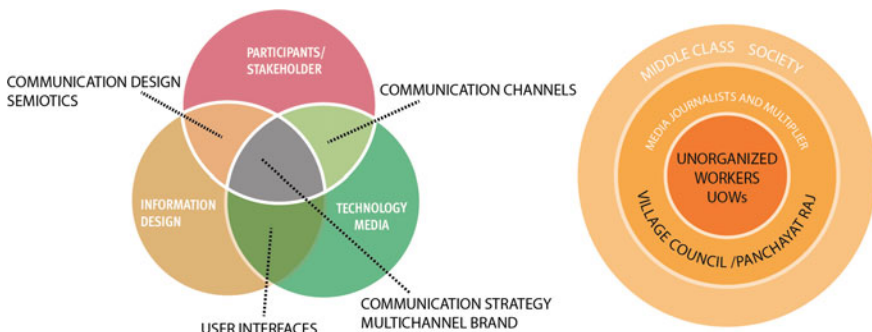
Planning and evaluation research should accompany every planning and design process for a communication campaign, since communication is "what arrives and causes an effect, not what you send out" [10].

The research undertaken by the author, with the help of a local interpreter, was qualitative. The primary research was conducted through interviews, with the help of a local interpreter, with Unorganized Workers and Self-Help-Groups (SHGs) as well as members of the Panchayat Rajs (Village Councils) and Community Facilitators in three different districts of Karnataka. The research was documented with audiovisual media.

We conducted in total 90 interviews in three different districts, Hoskote, Mangalore and Gulbarga with 61 Unorganized Workers, 15 Community Facilitators and 14 members of the Village Councils (Panchayat Raj). Questionnaires, as well as cards, on which pictograms or photos were printed, were shown to participants in isolation from the print media, brochures and books, they had originally been used in.

Parallel to the testing of the pictograms and photos, fresh pictograms, illustrations and a new logo were developed and tested (Fig. 5).

The purpose of the research in the field was to examine the visual perception (semiotics) of our stakeholders and their use of media and technology, in detail



**Fig. 5** Field research was conducted to understand and examine the perception of stakeholders (target groups), their use of communication channels and technology. The aim was to implement the learnings into a communication strategy and multichannel brand. Design: Sabina von Kessel

1. to examine and test the print material used so far
  - to study the visual language and cultural perceptions of the participants
2. to investigate the use of communication channels:
  - cellphones (types of cellphones and their use)
  - mass media/entertainment (which TV channels and which soaps are watched)
  - actors or celebrity spokespersons (known and liked)
3. to find out which consumer products/brands are commonly bought (to identify a brand for a public-private partnership)

In addition to the field research secondary research took the form of topic searches in the internet and academic texts, leading into commercial marketing, neuro-marketing and the emotional aspects of branding. The research was extended into communication campaigns and behaviour change theory and some well written papers from UNICEF led to learnings for this project.

### **1.3.1 Field Research and the Findings of the Survey**

The examination of print material and images shows that unspecifically designed visuals do not communicate with/to participants (Fig. 6).

79 % of our interviewees own an average of 2 cellphones with basic technology per family, from those only 15 % use it to send, receive sms. 19 % use the cellphone to listen to radiostations. None of the participants had internet access.

80 % watch TV and from those 82 % prefer the channel Udaya, 39 % (mostly women) watch and like the Kannada TV Soap Bangara, 55 % like Shiv Raj Kumar and Puneet Raj Kumar, 51 % Upendra. 28 % watch Kannada movies in film theatres.

## ***1.4 Learnings Overall***

The research shows, that Unorganized Workers and participants in Panchayat Rajs (Village Councils) struggle to interpret icons, pictograms, illustrations, graphs and info graphics and other representations which are used globally. Therefore visuals used in communication campaigns which intend to persuade and change behaviour have to use a vernacular visual language or adaptations of the same. They have to be specific towards detail, a tool, the crop growing on the field or the footwear of a worker has to look right.

The research shows that colourful, flat depictions which do not use perspective and are large enough, work best. Many UOWs cannot afford to wear glasses, and cannot read or see smaller letters or illustrations. Printed material cannot be the only





**Fig. 6** (Clockwise) Pictograms, photos and illustrations were shown in interviews with unorganized workers and members of Panchayat Rajs (village councils) in three different districts in Karnataka to evaluate if participants can derive meaning from the print material which was disseminated by community facilitators. Interviewer Johny Jaganath, Photos: Sabina von Kessel. (Left) This leaflet was disseminated in thousands into the households of unorganized workers. It used inconsistently designed cliparts, randomly taken from the internet to communicate social security schemes and single window service to rural, illiterate stakeholders. The logo (on top) is too complex, uses unspecific cliparts and does not fulfill technical requirement, eg. cannot be recognized in small scale. Many people in rural areas simply do not wear glasses and cannot read or see smaller letters or illustrations. Design: GIZ, DOL Karnataka

and first choice, since it is often unpractical for people who do not have bookshelves and is often used best to light the cooking fire in the evening.

Print media in form of brochures and posters can only be one, out of a multiplicities of media, which tries to persuade or influence behaviour.



Communication4Development needs to be strategic and use multi channels to reach the participants. *Only strategic communication works to influence behaviour. One single media does not move anybody.*

### 1.5 Put into Practise

The illustrations we developed during the research process went through a cycle of testing and redesigning multiple times before they “worked”. The participants were very specific towards details. We learnt that details like the right shape of tools or the look of the crops growing on the fields in the background of an image matter a lot to the understanding of the whole image. We have adapted the P-process [11] for our work. All of the developed material is reevaluated and if necessary redesigned and tested again, parallel to the processes of participation and capacity strengthening.

### 1.6 Consequences: Developing New Design Strategies

The learnings resulted in designing an integrated communication and PR plan, creating a new visual identity and brand, as well as producing new print media. TV spots and radio jingles as part of a brand campaign for Single Window Service will be broadcasted in local stations (Figs. 7, 8, 9 and 10).

**Fig. 7** The idea for the new visual identity of the single-window-service stems from the sacred geometry of rangolis, which show a great mode of abstract recognition and memory. Design: Sabina von Kessel



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**Fig. 8** Poster (A1) to promote RSBY, the national health insurance for unorganized workers with illustrations which translate not only insurance benefits into a visual language, but also who the beneficiaries are, how they get access and how much they have to pay. Illustrations Juliane Denogent, design Sabina von Kessel



**Fig. 9** The brochure for construction worker welfare board (CWWB), has, when folded, the size of a shirt pocket with illustrations which translate accessibility and insurance benefits into a visual language. Illustrations Juliane Denogent, design Sabina von Kessel



**Fig. 10** Scenes from the production of TV spots as part of the branding campaign to promote single window service for unorganized workers. Filmproduction Firiri films, photos Sabina von Kessel

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