

Participatory and development communication : what now?

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PARTICIPATORY AND DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION: WHAT NOW?

This article offers an overview of the major trends and paradigms in the domain of development communication, known as the planned use of strategies, processes and communication technologies for the purpose of development. It presents the three leading development communication theories used to date: the modernization model, the dependency model and the participation model, which has become the new dominant paradigm in the field and seeks to facilitate the process of community development. This article presents many reasons why this paradigm, which has been ignored or criticized by some, constitutes a significant advancement, placing communication at the heart of the definition and execution of the development process.

Keywords: community, modernization, self-reliance, cooperation, democracy.

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Among the five billion human beings living on earth, 850 million are still suffering from hunger today. According to the latest estimations of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO),¹ the food crisis is ongoing in 33 countries around the world. While 500 million people live comfortably, 4.5 billion people are suffering from poverty. Of these, close to 774 million adults are illiterate, according to the latest data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).² Finally, in rural areas, 2.1 billion people live on less than \$2 a day, and 888 million live on less than a dollar a day (The World Bank 2007: 1).

Despite the considerable financial and technological means dedicated to the task for decades, and despite the optimism and express conviction that underdevelopment can be overcome, we have to admit that the objective of fighting poverty, adopted as far back as the 1950s by many international organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO, has not been achieved.

One response sector, still somewhat under-estimated, has nevertheless come to the fore since then: development communication.

1. Emergence of the Concept

Development communication, which consists of the planned use of strategies, processes and communication technologies for the purpose of development (Bessette 2004: 14), originated in the works of Daniel Lerner and Everett M. Rogers, both specialists in sociology, one at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) and the other at Michigan State University, and those of Wilbur Schramm, a communications specialist from Stanford University. They proposed a “modernization” model which had a great impact on the academic world and on certain international development agencies, such as UNESCO, FAO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which financed various projects advocating the contributions of the media and communications in the

¹ <http://www.fao.org/giews/english/fo/index.htm> (consulted November 1, 2007)

² http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?URL_ID=6401&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201 (consulted November 1, 2007).

development of third world countries in the 1950s and 1960s. This model was the dominant development communication paradigm from around 1945 to 1965 (see Moumouni 1997; Servaes 2004; Bessette 2004).

As summarized by Moumouni, the basic premise of modernization theory is the “[...] massive transfer of capital, technologies, know-how, socio-political ideologies and cultures from the modern, developed, western societies to the traditional societies of the underdeveloped third world,” (2005: 216) without consideration for the real needs of the underprivileged populations in question, their culture or their environment.

This dominant neo-liberal paradigm consists of making underdeveloped societies, aided by the “civilizing force of technology,” (Lafrance 2006: 3) imitate industrialized Northern countries, leading to growth in production, which is considered synonymous with evolution and progress.

This development model favours one-way vertical communication. It relies on a rationale of persuasion, assisted by the central use of mass media, and its purpose is to change the behaviour of the targeted populations.

In *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), Lerner was the first to emphasize the potentially important role of mass media in the development of traditional societies and underdeveloped countries. The mass media are considered to be signs and independent agents of modernization, as well as economic growth factors much like urbanization, literacy or even individual participation in political activity. Lerner feels that every society or country that wishes to free itself from traditionalism must adopt the western, neo-liberal model, embodied by industrialization, the development of modern infrastructures, technologies and economic institutions supported by an adequate and efficient government presence, the level of education of the people, their capacity to understand and control their environment, and their openness. Lerner also perceives a correlation between societal modernization and individual character, recognizing three distinctive types of individuals: “traditional,” “in transition” and “modern.” The latter are notably characterized by empathy – a fundamental concept in the process of modernization, according to Lerner – which allows them to put themselves in someone else’s shoes and guarantees their openness to the changes proposed to them.

In their respective books *Mass Media and National Development* (1964) and *Diffusion of Innovations* (1962), Wilbur Schramm and Everett

M. Rogers also advanced the concept of development communication, expanding on Lerner's line of thinking.³

These authors focused in particular on the fundamental role that the media plays in the evolution, modernization⁴ and enrichment of any nation as an accelerator of social and economic development. In this sense, the scope of a given population's societal evolution and political commitment is assessed in relation to its degree of exposure to mass media.

While Schramm demonstrated an interest in two-way communication, Rogers recommended a one-way, top-down communication model, insisting on the role that opinion leaders can play in propagating innovations and acknowledging the importance of interpersonal communication and social communications networks. For Rogers (1962), communication is a process by which an idea is transferred by a source to a receptor, with the intention of altering the receptor's behaviour. Generally, the source wants to change the receptor's knowledge of an idea, develop or change his or her attitude towards it, or persuade the receptor to integrate it in his or her daily conduct.

Modernization theory and the concepts proposed by Lerner, Schramm and Rogers did not trigger the expected international development. After roughly ten years of development communication, communication technologies have indeed spread to a surprising extent in many disadvantaged countries (see Schramm & Lerner 1976: 2–10), but they have not led to the social and economic development or to the enrichment and modernization of the societies in question. The very foundations of the dominant paradigm, which prevailed until the 1970s, have been called into question while Lerner, Schramm and Rogers themselves finally admitted that it had many weaknesses.⁵ Among the model's shortcomings, let us point

³ We note in particular that Rogers expands on Lerner's original categorization people, distinguishing five types of individuals, in relation to their enthusiasm to adopt innovations or, on the contrary, reject them. These are "innovators," "early adopters," "early majority," "late majority," and finally "laggards."

⁴ Rogers defines modernization as the process by which individuals go from a conventional to a more complex, technologically advanced and rapidly changing life-style. (Rogers 1969: 48).

⁵ On this subject, also see other authors: Rogers 1976; Melkote 1991; Schramm & Lerner 1976.

out the insistence on the permanence of the changes being made, the lack of knowledge about the influence of economic and political structures on the power to adopt those innovations, and the neglect of the social and cultural environment in the intervention areas.

2. Dependency Theory

Another leading development communication theorie is the dependency model, which emerged in Latin America in the 1950s as an alternative to the dominant paradigm. This theory, still active today and supported by authors such as Schiller (1976), Freire (1996), Cardoso (1980) and Masmoudi (1979), focuses on the disparities between nations, which are exacerbated by a world economic system that imposes the western model on Southern countries as a reference and condition for development. As Dos Santos explains,

[d]ependency is a conditioning situation in which the economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others. A relationship of interdependence between two or more economies or between such economies and the world trading system becomes a dependent relationship when some countries can expand through self-impulsion while others, being in a dependent position, can only expand as a reflection of the expansion of the dominant countries, which may have positive or negative effects on their immediate development. In either case, the basic situation of dependence causes these countries to be both backward and exploited. Dominant countries are endowed with technological, commercial, capital and socio-political predominance over dependent countries [...] and can therefore exploit them, and extract part of the locally produced surplus. Dependence, then, is based upon an international division of labour which allows industrial development to take place in some countries while restricting it in others, whose growth is conditioned by and subjected to the power centers of the world. (1997: 231)

According to this view of development, the international economic system hinders development, and the disadvantaged nations have to settle for a peripheral role on the global economic scene, which is dominated by a capitalist system generated and maintained by Northern countries.

In this view, mass media and communication technologies are not instruments and vectors of development and social change. On the contrary, they are regarded as an essential part of the dominating strategies of Northern countries, an instrument of ideological manipulation and control used to keep Southern countries in a state of underdevelopment. Under the pretext of the free flow of information and free trade, the media widely propagates the western model – a conservative, capitalist ideology – and establishes a monopoly in the area, preventing the development of the national media in the target countries.

Dependency theory has some flaws, however. Focused on promoting radical anticapitalism, the partisans of this model view the problem of underdevelopment from a strictly international perspective, failing to consider the internal factors and problems specific to each underdeveloped country and the potential national or local causes of social, political and economic imbalance. Furthermore, this theory has not generated a proposal that highlights the role of communication in the resolution of the problem of underdevelopment.

3. Participation Theory

In 1980, the MacBride Commission, an international assembly mandated by UNESCO, studied the problems of development communication and, in the conclusion of its report *Many Voices, One World*, instituted the New International Information Communication Order (NIICO). NIICO proposes the democratization of communications and information resources through the abolition of censorship and arbitrary control of information, through the imposition of standards on large multinationals communications firms to protect the national objectives and socio-cultural values of target countries, and finally, through the development of world communication policies related to general social, cultural, economic and political goals, resulting in the creation and development of appropriate infrastructures. Organizations are encouraged to set up and support local media, news agencies and alternative media that respect traditional means of communication, fostering access to information and means of communication for the people involved, preserving their right of expression and helping defend their identity (International Commission for the Study of Communication 1980).

While the MacBride Commission is responsible for helping establish a new order and a certain independence for national media – the increase in channels of communication and broadcast did indeed help create a free and diversified media, and the introduction of techniques and technologies such as broadcast satellites, miniaturized broadcast and production equipment, and extensive cable networks are necessary conditions for developing countries to take part in the international flow of communication (Lafrance 2006: 19) – and while the World Commission on Environment and Development’s Brundtland report emphasized, in 1988, the need for development to be participatory and endogenous, we must acknowledge the worthy contribution of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in its 1975 report, *What now? Another Development*.⁶ For any development policy, the importance of adapting to the material and ecological circumstances, the political and economic situation and the local culture of the target country is clear. This document also emphasizes the primary objective of any aid program, i.e., satisfaction of the basic material and social needs of the people in question. The plan must take certain core values into consideration, such as respect for individuals, equality, self-reliance and decision-making power to give individuals an active role to play in their own development, which entails promoting bottom-up communication, the right to diversity, and the promotion of ecologically sound technologies, all with the goal of establishing effective cooperation among nations, to facilitate development in the countries in question (Hammarskjöld 1975: 122).

What now? Another Development clearly establishes the thesis of participatory development, a development communication theory that was also introduced during the UNESCO debates in the 1970s.⁷ In the 1970s and 80s, the evolution of the participatory development concept was linked to the disruptions caused by globalization, such as increasing concern about

⁶ A PDF version of this report is available on the Foundation’s website at: http://www.dhf.uu.se/pdf/75_what_now.pdf (122, accessed October 27, 2007).

⁷ The Belgrade Meeting in 1977 (former-Yugoslavia) greatly influenced UNESCO’s contribution in that field, clarifying the role of communication as a development tool: “Participation implies a higher level of public involvement in communication systems. It includes the involvement of the public in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems.” (in: Servaes 1999: 85)

environmental issues and poverty in some parts the world, the spread of democracy, increasing levels of education in developing countries, increasingly open political, economic and trading systems, and the stimulation and expansion of communication and information flows.⁸

Now viewed as “integral to the overall development effort”, to the point that it has become the new dominant paradigm in the field, the basic needs and participatory development theory is based on a number of key principles that state that any development approach must: 1) focus on fulfilling basic human needs; 2) find its purpose, strength and resources within the concerned community; 3) use the available natural resources in considerate and environmentally friendly ways; 4) promote participatory democracy at every level of society; 5) encourage necessary structural changes in social relations and economic activities in order to foster the spread of autonomous management systems and wide-spread participation in the decision-making that affects the community in question (Servaes 2004: 59). The goal of this paradigm is to create mobilization and participation on every level – international, national, local and individual – through dialogue, collective evaluation of social issues, joint search for solutions, and shared decisions on target activities and objectives, by enhancing the knowledge and expertise of the individuals involved in the process and respecting their identity.¹⁰

⁸ International Labour Office, “‘Participation’: New partnerships emerging in development,” International Labour Conference, Report V (1). Promotion of Cooperatives, 89th Session, June 2001. <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc89/rep-v-1.htm#1.5.4.%20%20Participation>: (accessed November 9, 2007).

⁹ International Labour Office, “‘Participation’: New partnerships emerging in development,” International Labour Conference, Report V (1). Promotion of Cooperatives, 89th Session, June 2001. <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc89/rep-v-1.htm#1.5.4.%20%20Participation>: (accessed November 9, 2007).

¹⁰ As Servaes points out, “[t]his model stresses reciprocal collaboration throughout all levels of participation. As a result, the focus moves from a ‘communicator-’ to a more ‘receiver-centric’ orientation, with the resultant emphasis on meaning sought and ascribed rather than information transmitted. With this shift in focus, one is no longer attempting to create a need for the information one is disseminating, but one is rather disseminating information for which there is a need. Experts and development workers respond rather than dictate; they choose what is relevant to the context in which they are working. The emphasis is on information exchange rather than on persuasion as in the diffusion model.” (Servaes 1999: 89)

By acknowledging the equal importance of the economic, societal, cultural and ecological dimensions of any development approach, this theory places value not only in the technological advancement and economic performance of a society, but also in its resources, its culture and customs, and its value system, as well as the context of the development objective and its adoption potential for the target communities.

It rejects the “external expert syndrome” that many development operations¹¹ suffer from, and, instead, recommends collaboration and mutual trust in order to gradually develop an integrated system that promotes independence for the people who receive the aid. In this paradigm, the development officer operates as a facilitator who considers individuals as participants – not as recipients – in the definition, planning, programming, establishment and evaluation of the development initiatives (Besette 2004: 12, 18).

Let us emphasize in particular the importance of the target community’s involvement in the design phase of the development initiative. Mere consultation of the concerned individuals does not make it a participatory approach. As Servaes points out,

[t]he participatory model views ordinary people as the keys agents of change or participants for development, and for this reason it focuses on their aspirations and strengths. Development is meant to liberate and emancipate people and, in so doing, enable them to meet their basic needs. Local cultures are respected. The participatory model sees people as the nucleus of development. Development means lifting up the spirits of a local community to take pride in its own culture, intellect, and environment. Development aims to educate and stimulate people to be active in self and communal improvements, while maintaining a balanced ecology. (1999: 93)

To respect these principles, the communication approach for the basic needs and participatory development theory promotes the decentralization

¹¹ As clarified at the International Labour Conference held by the International Labour Office in June 2001, “this means that it is outside professionals who set the project objectives, proceed with the analysis, prepare it for financing and manage its execution. Local stakeholders may be ‘consulted’ but are rarely allowed to have any real influence based on their knowledge.” [http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc89/rep-v-1.htm#1.5.4.%20"Participation"](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc89/rep-v-1.htm#1.5.4.%20): (accessed November 9, 2007).

of the media, the democratization of communication and the emergence of a type of journalism and news circulation that respects and reflects the cultural identity of the community in question. For communications to effectively support development initiatives, the mass media must work with local and community media, and with basic interactive communications, such as song, dance, myth and legend, to enhance the accessibility of the information, its appropriation and, hopefully, the adoption of activities beneficial to the community.

In terms of practices, participatory development communication is understood as a planned action – based in part on participatory processes and in part on media and interpersonal communications – which facilitates dialogue between stakeholders gathered around a development problem or a shared goal in order to identify and implement a realistic initiative to solve the problem or reach the goal, and then supports and furthers the initiative (Bessette 2004: 10). In this context, one-way top-down communication, which consists of merely broadcasting information, is completely abandoned in favour of bottom-up, horizontal, two-way or multidirectional communication which relies on the people's participation to identify the shared development problem and deeply encourages women's involvement as agents of communication.

Among the different steps that generally make up participatory development communications strategies, we want to draw particular attention to the development of a deeper understanding of the immediate intervention context, especially through dialogue; the establishment of a relationship with the community in question, and the presentation of the development initiative to the community members; the identification of groups and stakeholders involved in the development issue and initiative; the involvement of the community in the definition of the issue, the search for solutions, and the identification and implementation of practical actions. Other important factors are also involved, such as needs assessment; the establishment of goals, outreach activities, and follow-up and implementation plans; the selection of tools and appropriate means of communication for each group the development officer needs to address; content development; circulation of the information to the participants; the possible creation of partnerships with resource people and organizations working in the same areas or sectors; monitoring and evaluation of

the communications strategy; and, perhaps, the development of a results sharing strategy (Bessette 2004: 22, 33).

To avoid a utopian view of participatory development, anchor interventions in reality and secure deeper engagement of the communities involved in the development process, Moumouni & Ukaga emphasize the role of the participatory leaders. These leaders are members of communities targeted for a development project and are much more than simple opinion leaders: indeed, they feel responsible for the satisfaction of the essential needs of the community, and to this end, they help implement and adopt the technologies that will improve their quality of life. They also help bring about a shared goal by encouraging extensive interaction between the players and greater participation in the definition and execution of the various stages of the development project (Moumouni & Ukaga 2006).

By promoting community participation in development initiatives, participatory communication seems to provide a potentially effective tool for the community-based development process.

As such, and given the real state of emergency in our world today, at a time when it appears impossible for us to reach the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG)¹² by the target date of 2015, it seems appropriate to examine the various development models we have used to date, in order to develop new intervention policies, taking past failures and their causes into consideration and taking greater advantage of the potential contributions of communication in the development context.

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¹² The Millennium Development Goals were established in 2000 by the members of the United Nations. The eight goals range from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger of the world to ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development. <http://www.un.org/french/millenniumgoals/index.shtml> (accessed on November 2, 2007).

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