



# Development Communication and the Development Trap

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## Development Communication and Development

Development communication is the container descriptor of projects, strategies, and policies that use human communication – in a multitude of formats – to achieve positive social change (In most definitions of development communication, there is a strong link with the overall field of international development. In most definitions of development communication, one finds a strong link with overall international development. According to the World Bank, development communication is the “integration of strategic communication in development projects” based on a clear understanding of indigenous realities. And UNICEF views it 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.” In UNDP documents, the term “development support communication” was used to refer to the role of communication in promoting UN agricultural and development programs.). Nora C. Quebral – sometimes referred to as the mother

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The colonizers came to wither the flowers. To nourish their own flower, they harmed and sucked the flower of others. Chilam Balam, Maya prophet, 1500

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of development communication – defined the field as “the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfillment of the human potential” (2001). The field of development communication finds its origin in the concern of UN member states to “develop media of information in underdeveloped countries” (United Nations General Assembly, -UNGA- 1957]. In 1962 the UNGA stated that “development of communication media was part of overall development.” From here, an impressive array of communication projects came to be executed, funded, and evaluated by a growing community of international states and nongovernmental institutions. Development communication projects have focused on such issues as mass poverty, malnourishment, women’s empowerment, educational capacity building, agricultural extension, mortality of women and their babies, and illiteracy. Its agenda coincides pretty much with the global MDGs (The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000 and the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. All 191 United Nations member states at that time, and at least 22 international organizations, committed themselves to help achieve the following goals. For the post-2015 period, the UN member states adopted in September 2015 “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda 2030 establishes 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved over the coming 15 years.” According to former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon “The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals are our shared vision of humanity and a social contract between the world’s leaders and the people. They are a to-do list for people and planet, and a blueprint for success.” Early 2016 the SDGs went into effect.):

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education.
3. Promote gender equality and the empowerment of women.
4. Reduce child and maternal mortality.
5. Improve maternal healthcare.
6. Combat HIV and AIDS, malaria, and other major diseases.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability.
8. Develop global partnership for development NOTE ON MDG.

The MDGs represent positive social change, and the field of development communication is by and large fueled by the need to contribute to positive social change.

The irony of the field is that development communication refers – in the colonial perception of the world – to social change to be achieved in the global South. There are few if any communication projects that are initiated by consultants from the South to achieve social change in countries of the global North. And yet there are numerous countries like the member states of the EU or the USA that would benefit from positive social change to deal with such burning issues as rising inequality, drug abuse, organized crime, racism, populism, refugee policies, banking

crises, dwindling space for civil action, or urban violence. In all these issues, failing communication (fake news, commercial censorship, political propaganda, or the lack of social dialogue) plays a crucial role. However, if one surveys the field, then judging by numbers of projects and volumes of financial resources development communication was and remains Northern business and very much part of international aid programs that have been described as “the circus that never leaves town.”

The targets of the MDGs, for example, practically all focus on changes in the global South and ignore that the problems of the South may only be solved in case the global North implements radical changes in its trade policies, military projects, and environmental politics and faces the reality of the colonial mind which is still prevailing in North-South relations. The key aspects of colonial rule continue to shape global power relations. Most colonizers never really gave up, and many of the colonized became accomplices in continued external domination. More often than not the Western image of how humanity should live continues to be the standard. Needed is – according to Dutta – a “postcolonial approach to communicative processes” that examines the colonial discourses that circulate and reify the material inequities across the globe (2011, 5).

The global contemporary development effort is best represented by the MDGs that were mentioned above. However, these laudable were not achieved – as hoped by 2015 – and were relabeled Sustainable Development Goals for All. There are evidently – as always – exceptions where on a small scale through the application of local knowledge by local communities, remarkable changes have been realized. What has been called the “world’s largest promise” is for its realization obviously dependent upon communication in the broad sense of information provision, conscientization, stimulation, and conversation. To achieve the positive social change that the MDGs and the new SDGs strive toward communication is a crucial tool (In the context of the MDGs or SDGs, communication is rarely mentioned except for the references to advanced information and communication technologies. The emphasis on the need to use the ICTs is remarkable in the light of the absence of concrete evidence that these technologies have substantially contributed to the changes their protagonists promised.), but with the exception of community radio projects (Good illustrations are found in Jallof 2012.) across the globe, the dominant media continue to function as conduits for cultural invasion and globalization as neoliberal market integration.

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## Development as Delivery

In the debates on the global digital divide (during the United Nations World Summit On The Information Society (2003 and 2005)), it was not critically questioned whether rich-poor divides can at all be resolved within the framework of the prevailing development paradigm. In this paradigm development is conceived of as a state of affairs which exists in society A and, unfortunately, not in society B. Therefore, through some project of intervention in society B, resources have to be transferred from A to B. Development is thus a relationship between interventionists and subjects of intervention. The interventionists transfer such resources as

information, ICT, and knowledge as inputs that will lead to development as output. In this approach, development is “the delivery of resources” (Kaplan 1999, 5–7). This delivery process is geared toward the integration of its recipients into a global marketplace. There is no space for a different conceptualization of development as a process of empowerment that intends “to enable people to participate in the governance of their own lives” (Kaplan 1999, 19). In the WSIS discourse there was a strong tendency to consider the global digital disparity as a problem in its own right. This divide was not primarily seen as a dimension of the overall global “development divide.” Since this bigger problem was not seriously addressed, a romantic fallacy prevailed which suggested that resolving information and communication problems, and bridging knowledge gaps or addressing inequalities in access to technologies, can contribute to the solution of the world’s most urgent and explosive socioeconomic inequities. This “ghettoization” of communication ignores the insight that the solution of the “global development divide” has little to do with information, communication, or information and communication technology. This divide is a matter of political will which is lacking in a majority of nation-states. Instead of the strong political commitment that is needed, the WSIS discourse focused on the possibility of a global “Digital Solidarity Fund.” This is an almost scandalous proposition in view of the fact that since the 1970s all the efforts to develop and sustain such funds for communication development, telecom infrastructures, or technological self-reliance have failed because of the lack of political will. The WTO ministerial meeting in Cancún (September 2003) demonstrated once again that not all stakeholders are equally intent on solving rich-poor divides. As Walden Bello commented, “Not even the most optimistic developing country came to Cancún expecting some concessions from the big rich countries in the interest of development” (Bello 2003, 16). Fortunately, the poor countries understood that the rich countries (particularly the USA and the EU countries) intended to impose yet another set of demands on them that would be very detrimental to their societies and their people. In this sense the Cancún meeting was a great success. That same sense of alertness did not inspire the poor country representatives at the December 2003 WSIS.

A difficult problem is that if indeed greater global equality in access to information could be achieved, this would not guarantee an improvement in the quality of people’s lives. “Even when these disparities are recognised and new organisational models such as telecentres are proposed, the policy emphasis is frequently biased towards improving access to networks rather than towards content creation and the social processes whereby digital content can be converted into socially or economically useful knowledge” (Mansell and Wehn 1998, 8). Including people in the provision of basic public services does not create egalitarian societies. The existing social inequality means that people benefit from these services in highly inequalitarian ways. Actually, the growing literacy in many societies did not bring about more egalitarian social relationships. It certainly did have some empowering effect, but did not significantly alter power relations. Catching up with those who have the distinct social advantage is not a realistic option. They too use the new developments, such as ICTs, and at a minimum the gap remains and might even increase. It is a common experience with most technologies that the powerful players

know best how to appropriate and control new technological developments and use them to their advantage. In the process they tend to further increase their advantage. The conventional approach to development may correct social disadvantages through the equal treatment of unequal but does not structurally change relations of power. Providing equal opportunities to unequal parties often functions in the interest of the more powerful.

The conventional discourse has no strong interest in the cosmopolitan ideals of communal responsibility and collective welfare. A cosmopolitan discourse accepts reciprocal obligations among the members of society. The essential issue of cosmopolitanism is the conversation with the other. The question however is on whose terms is this global conversation conducted. Often the engagement with the other – despite assurances of participation, deliberation, and empowerment, managed by a dominant, missionary culture – thus remains a colonial adventure. Establishing a complex adaptive framework for development communication in the twenty-first century requires a postcolonial [institutional] mindset that accepts reciprocal obligations in development and communication. It needs a global community that realizes that the destinies of the powerful and the powerless are intertwined.

In his final report on the MDGs, the UN Secretary-General (in 2010) did not address the question of the adequacy and effectiveness of the conceptual framework within which the goals are embedded. The report stated that the goals are achievable and that the shortcomings in progress can be fully explained by a lack of political will, insufficient funds, a lack of focus and sense of responsibility, and insufficient interest in sustainable development. However, this is only part of the explanation. More than anything else, the “development trap” stood in the way of achieving positive social change.

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## Development Trap

The development goals as formulated by the international community are laudable moral aspirations that are possibly achievable, and communication (in different formats from information provision to social dialogue) is undoubtedly a crucial factor in realizing them. However, the “world’s largest promise” cannot become reality as long as overall development (of which development communication is part) is captured by a colonial conceptualization of development as an interventionist, linear process. Too many development communication projects were and are based on the colonial mental model that assumes that one can develop others and that social change can be achieved through external intervention. However, development is always from within. It is an inherent process and “In that sense, you cannot grow potatoes. Potatoes grow themselves” (Sankatsing argues, 2016, 34). Genuine development is a process of natural evolution that has been largely obstructed by development projects and policies. As Sankatsing proposes, “Development is the mobilization of inherent potentialities in iterative response to challenges posed by nature, habitat and history to realize a sustainable project with an internal locus

of command” (2016, 35). Against this what has been called development by international agencies and development scholars is better described as “envelopment.” As Sankatsing defines it “Envelopment is the paternalistic, disempowering control of an entity by an external locus of command at the expense of its internal life process and ongoing evolution” (2016, 38). Contrary to a process of unfolding inherent human potentialities development as envelopment became a “unidirectional process of transformation by incorporating the other into an alien destiny” (2016, 38). Envelopment is disruptive “since it prevents a community from responding in a natural way to contextual conditions and environmental challenges” (2016, 39). Many development communication projects – as part of overall development projects – fell in the trap where development was really envelopment and where positive social change in the evolutionary sense was seriously obstructed. It is tempting to counter this reasoning by pointing to successful “empowerment through communication” projects, but also here the focus is usually more on the empowerment of the other and not on the self-empowerment of the other. Empowerment projects often take place in asymmetrical relations and hamper “a process in which people liberate themselves from all those forces that prevent them from controlling decisions affecting their lives” (Hamelink 1994, 142).

As part of overall development, development communication can only escape the development trap if the field is reconceptualized as an evolutionary, complex adaptive process and implicitly accepts nonlinearity in thinking about communication. This means that development communication should be based on the solid scientific basis of evolutionary thinking. The most general observation in Darwinian biology is that species (and their behaviors) evolve over time through successful adaptation to their environment. The key to biological evolution is the finding of solutions to adaptive problems.

It seems sensible to argue that a similar process occurs in forms of nonbiological evolution, such as cultural and psychological evolution. In these forms, human beings find nongenetic solutions to adaptive problems. One such adaptation is human communication: an evolutionary response to problems in our environment. Communication is essentially linked to human evolution: evolutionary theory. The origins of human communication can only be meaningfully approached from evolutionary theory. Although “evolutionary communication is a powerful theoretical perspective that applies to all forms of biological and social interaction” (Lull and Neiva 2012, 16) and evolutionary theory “is one of the most powerful scientific explanations ever put forward” (ibid., 16), there is no impact on communication theory. The social sciences have marginalized biology and particularly Darwinian evolutionary theory from its efforts to understand the world. Therefore, Lull and Neiva argue “for a major infusion of Darwinian thinking into communication theory...” (ibid., 16).

Communication is a crucial instrument in both our biological and cultural evolution, and yet the social sciences and the humanities have been unable to provide a solid understanding of how culture evolves. The thinking has been too much focused on the individual and not on the group. Cultural evolution and with it the evolution of human communication would be best studied at the level of the group since human life is characterized by living in large groups (nations,

corporations, tribes). The focus of much research has been the individual, whereas human communicative behavior can be best understood if studied as behavior in social groups (see Richerson and Boyd 2006 on “population thinking”). The basic Darwinian algorithm for successful adaptation is based upon variation, selection, and replication. In the domain of human communication this can be applied as follows. Communicative behavior evolves through variation. A great variety of modalities of communication evolve because of the need to adapt to different and changing environments. This evolution is both nonintentional and intentional and limited by both genotypical and historical factors. Much of it proceeds (as in the evolution of knowledge in science) by trial and error. In the evolutionary process, the best adaptive solutions are kept. Communication forms that optimally serve human survival and reproduction be retained. Those forms of attention and memory that are designed to notice, store, and retrieve information inputs and that are useful to solving adaptive problems will further evolve. Inadequate communicative solutions will disappear. The most adequate adaptations will be transmitted to future generations.

The field of development communication equals the complexity of a tropical rainforest in which everything is related to everything else (interdependence), where small events may have big and unpredictable effects (nonlinearity) and where one cannot make reliable forecasts as flows of ideas and opinion may unexpectedly and rapidly change (uncertainty). A complex system is a collection (universe) of interacting agents that compete for a scarcity of essential resources (like space in traffic or oxygen + glucose in cancer cells). Characteristic of such systems is a mixture of order and disorder. Without a central controller, the emerging disorder (the traffic jam) may resolve as if nothing had happened and without external interference. The traffic jam appears for no reason and then disappears again (Johnson 2010, 19). Development communication is both orderly and chaotic. The conduct of its agents is dynamic. To understand this complexity, the prevailing scientific preference for determinism, reductionism, and quantification is not helpful to understand nonlinear processes in which unpredictable and surprising phenomena emerge without a central controller (Hamelink 2015, 46).

From the study of evolutionary biology, we learn that human communication was always driven by the instinct to cooperate. The species homo understood early on that their communities would benefit from cooperative communication. Communication made the kind of coordination that hunting required possible and facilitated the organization of complex societies. There is a good deal of evidence to safely suggest that the origin of human communication lies in the instinct to cooperate. Through cooperative communication, humans designed adequate adaptive systems that secured their survival and reproductive capacity. Human communication is a key player in the biological and cultural evolution of humanity (Tomasello 2008). Human cooperative communication emerged as a collaborative activity that was needed for an effective adaptation to rapidly changing environments. Understanding development and by implication development communication as a complex adaptive system helps to see how these processes have to be – almost chaotically diverse, innovative and the dynamic so they can cater for the constant

changes in human communicative behavior and the nonlinear and probabilistic nature of human communication.

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## From Envelopment to Development

Leading the road toward development as the liberation of inherent potentialities is an evolutionary understanding of development as adaptation to external realities. If the field could be reconceptualized, this would also imply a redefinition of the agencies (statal and nongovernmental) that design and implement strategies for the application of communication tools to development.

As development communication is practically always an organizational effort, it is important to address the quality of institutional formats that prevail in these organizations.

Large protocol-driven bureaucracies (such as UN agencies and the larger INGOs) are well equipped for envelopment but not equally well for development. As Ramalingam argues that what is most needed is the creative and innovative transformation of how aid works. Foreign aid today is dominated by linear, mechanistic ideas that emerged from early twentieth-century industry and is ill-suited to the world we face today. The problems and systems aid agencies deal with on a daily basis have more in common with ecosystems than machines: they are interconnected, diverse, and dynamic; they cannot be just simply re-engineered or fixed. A crucial element in institutional transformation will have to be the way in which policies, strategies, and projects will be evaluated in terms of their contribution to positive social change. Today, the key agencies have not developed reliable instruments for assessing effects of communicative interventions. The tendency to quantification and thus simplification makes it impossible to seriously monitor complex processes such as development communication. The agencies and their result-based management strategies and evaluation instruments focused on the measurement of quantity, and “. . . despite technically sophisticated efforts to develop tools, techniques and frameworks, the majority of accountability solutions and practices retain an upward focus to donors” (Ramalingam 2015, 120).

Institutions evolved as adaptive responses to the need to cooperate (in order to make communal living possible), to the need for collective action (for survival purposes; in hunting big game and distributing it; defense against predators or con-specific bullies), and to the need of social behavior. Pro-social behavior stands for cooperation, altruism, generosity, trust, and trustworthiness. Antisocial behavior stands for competition, selfishness, distrust, and unreliability. Although institutions such as the law may be intended to prevent antisocial behavior, they may end up engaging in antisocial behavior. The direction that institutionalization has taken in modern societies – in such fields as education, healthcare, or law – tends to produce unsettling antisocial behavior. In development at large and development communication, the institutional factor is important: effective and safe institutions may lead to cooperation, generosity, altruism, trust, and trustworthiness, and poorly functioning, corrupt institutions may lead to the opposite (Jordan et al. 2015, 95).



Human beings are institutionalizing animals. “The role of institutions in human cooperation has received much less attention among experimentalists using economic games than direct and indirect reciprocity. But several recent studies have begun to demonstrate the power that institutional incentives have over human cooperative behavior in the lab” (Ibid., 91). Humans introduced institutions (like law, market, education, social communication, religion, healthcare, politics, family, money, and arts) as abstract notions that were operationally translated into organizations such as courts, media, cultural industries, schools, hospitals, political parties, the family, the banks, or trade bodies. These organizations came to be governed by hierarchical divisions of roles, by policies, codes of conduct, rules, directives, best practices, and feedback processes. Through these organizations we meet the satisfaction of basic needs. Not even our closest associates such as chimpanzees or bonobos design – for the satisfaction of their alimentary needs – agrobusiness conglomerates or mega meat processing organizations. We institutionalize the satisfaction of our needs that are increasingly characterized by organizational criteria such as (applied by the fast food industry) efficiency (we love our clients but they should not hang on too long), predictability (we hate uncertainty: the same French fries across the globe), calculation (the biggest hamburger for the lowest price), and rationalization (we mechanize the frying of burgers and the service to our clients). In addition, modern organizations feature hierarchization (although we know that in hospitals with strict hierarchies more patients die and that airlines with strict hierarchies have more crashes), professionalization (we ask people to outsource their own capabilities to those who know better), and protocolization. The latter is arguably the most essential feature of current institutionalization processes. Experience is replaced by protocols. In educational institutions, the competent teacher is no longer the person with a great experience in teaching but someone who follows the teaching instructions through which his/her teaching activities are monitored and evaluated. In healthcare organizations, the competent physicians are the ones that rely on evidence-based practices and not on experiential knowledge. The road to reliable diagnosis is blocked by protocols designed by outside interim managers. The core of the protocols is the rationalization of accountability. Desire for rational justification stands in the way of creativity and innovation in organizations; in education, it leads to uninspiring and boring teachers; in healthcare institutions, it kills people. The rules of the book are taking the place of the capacity for intelligent assessment based upon experience.

Rules and protocols originate from decisions: often incorrect decisions and often badly informed decisions. The rules once laid down in protocols are no longer open to intelligent human assessment and lead to wasting time in hospitals and universities on filling out forms and ticking off boxes whereas that time should have been used for teaching and caring. Evidently personal assessment –however competent – can be abused and should be subject to some sort of check but not without a reasonable balance between freedom and control. We have to try to undermine the tyranny of playing by the book and open up organizations for the use of intelligent capacities at assessment based upon experience.

## Development Communication Agencies as Convivial Institutions

The concept “convivial” denotes the combination of cheerfulness with cooperative helpfulness. The link is important as we know from a range of experiments in social psychology that people who are cheerful tend to be more helpful and cooperative; they evaluate themselves and others more positively and think more creatively. This is precisely what organizations that operate in the field of development and development communication need. Their major challenge is that they are often driven by the idea that bigger is better and try to reach economies of scale through expansion, take-overs, and mergers. However, the scale at which humans can conduct meaningful conversations about cooperation is limited. Technology allows us to communicate with many more people, but our cognitive abilities do not. The suggestion of unlimited social networks is deceptive. Whatever the technology facilitates, our mind will prefer a limited number of people in our networks. Convivial organizations are nonhierarchical places where humans learn, develop, and produce through creative storytelling. People are not seen as resources or as raw processable materials. The convivial organization will dismantle its office of human resources. People are seen as creative artists. The convivial organization will establish an office of creative production. In the convivial organization, transformation is fun. It is realized that when we want people to change types of behavior or mindsets, then we should be able to demonstrate to them that the alternative conduct or mentality is fun. People are willing to do all kinds of (new) things if they are pleasurable. Pleasure is an underrated motivating force in processes of change!

The conclusion is that the “world’s greatest promise” can be met if humanity institutionalizes the best moral ideas it has created (such as the global development goals) into organizations in which participants cooperate with cheerfulness because they found the common challenge of using the basis of human existence: cooperative communication to release human potentialities.

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