

## IS 'EMPOWERMENT' THE ANSWER?

Current Theory and Research on Development Communication

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**Abstract** / Recent theories of communication for development consider the lack of political, economic and cultural power of lower-status sectors as the central problem to be addressed in development. The majority do not have access to the education, technical assistance, good health and housing needed to make a contribution to national development. A deeper issue are the cultural values which see minorities such as women as not capable of making a contribution. Thus, the new movements seek to 'empower' themselves by resignifying the meaning of gender, youth, race, ethnicity and region as key actors in the development process and therefore as worthy of access to resources. Empowerment is central to the process of development, but empowerment, it is argued, needs to be located within a broader framework, which sees the goal of development as the cultural and political acceptance of universal human rights. Power must be seen as a source of social responsibility and service. Movements cannot stop at their own empowerment but must gain the respect for the rights of all in the society.

**Keywords** / communication / development / empowerment / human rights

Development studies indicate rather generally that in most parts of the developing world the quality of life according to indicators such as access to education and health facilities is *declining*. Even where GNP figures seem to indicate a growth in total wealth, the fact is that this national wealth is not well distributed. Likewise, in the area of communication for development, most governments and major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not using radio, video or other media effectively to educate the rural and urban poor or to provide support for development projects (Wilkins, 2000: 1). Why is there so little development in the area of development practice?

There is increasing agreement that the fundamental flaw in development theory and practice is the logic which has initiatives of the development process emanating from government or NGO programmes being controlled by urban-technical elites in alliance with international development agencies. Since a small group of educated urban-technical elites have the control, the economic, educational or other resources for development remain with them or are channelled to those of their own social status. Those living in rural areas or in the semi-rural urban poverty belts – the great majority of the people in most developing countries – suffer a chronic shortage of good doctors, good schools and other professional services because these professionals are concentrated in the middle-class areas of larger cities.

Karen Wilkins begins her recent collection of essays on communication for development 'with the assumption that to reshape the field of development communication we must situate its discourse and practice within contexts of power' (Wilkins, 2000: 1). Jan Servaes links 'empowerment' to participation in the collective decisions at all levels of society so that people can control the outcomes of these decisions. Empowerment is making sure that 'people are able to help themselves' (Servaes, 1999: 194). Melkote and Steeves (2001), in their textbook *Communication for Development in the Third World*, one of the most widely used at present, make empowerment their central organizing concept. They consider the power inequities as the central problem to be addressed in development (Melkote and Steeves, 2001: 36–7). They gather many definitions of empowerment but, for their own purposes, define it as a process in which individuals and organizations gain control and mastery over social economic conditions, over democratic participation in their communities and over their own stories (Melkote and Steeves, 2001: 37).

Servaes (1999: 56–9) and Wilkins (2000) understand social power not simply as the capacity to force others to do something against their will, but as a continual negotiation process in a field of many different resource holders. Power in the field of communication tends to emphasize the meaning of identities of different groups and the resources of these groups through discourses about development. Peasant movements, for example, have enlisted the help of dramatists, poets, novelists and other artificers of national discourses to change the discourse of development so that peasants are seen as central to national development and worthy of the allocation of resources.

## **Locating Participatory Development in a Framework of Planning**

The publications of Jan Servaes (1999, 2000) are a good place to start in any review of the current state of thinking about communication and development because he provides a comprehensive organization of virtually all of the issues that must be considered at different levels of analysis, from local to international, and he integrates the thinking of virtually all of the major contributions over the last 30 years.

Servaes argues that initiatives for development must begin with grass-roots communities and organizations (Servaes, 1999: 93). For him, the main actors in the development process are social movements that break out of submission to a hierarchical structure to establish their own independent system of communication and organization (Servaes, 1999: 158, 189). To take advantage of the development 'energy' of movements, local organizations should be allowed to decide if there is to be a programme at all, what issues it should deal with, how it is to be carried out and how it is to be evaluated. The ideal is to support these organizational initiatives until they can become an NGO managed by beneficiaries so that services are controlled by the local community. Local organizations should be enabled to seek information that is needed and to initiate and control linkages with whatever agency can supply the information or other resources needed. All government or NGO services should be made

accountable to the evaluations of the local organizations. Servaes envisages a democratized structure of development services which builds from the local level within a framework of recognition and support by government and international agencies (Servaes, 1999: 88–90).

Second, in a development model where initiatives are started and controlled from the grass-roots level, a participatory structure of communication is essential (Servaes, 1999: 84–8). Implied is a policy which favours a multiplication of small media controlled by local communities, organizations and movements. This permits grass-roots movements and organizations to question the ideologies which depreciate them, select the information which is truly important for them, and project more positive images of themselves. Organizations can produce their own media and they would have the opportunity to influence the policy of the bigger media.

Third, an essential step towards empowerment is that every unit of development must seek self-reliance, whether this be the nation or the local community (Servaes, 1999: 79–83). This means first severing ties of dependency on providers of development resources, especially ending dependence on the planning and guidance of more powerful partners. Every unit has to see what its basic and essential needs are and to supply these needs, as much as possible, with its own sustainable resources. A major goal is to be independent and self-reliant in every aspect of national life. Seeking help from the outside is done only to the extent that what comes from the outside is a complement to what the unit already has. Much of the success of the Asian countries is due to the fact that they are culturally delinked from the West and find that much of the culture of the West is not relevant for them.

Disassociation from central power holders is only the first step in self-reliance. No development unit can be autonomous. This must be followed by building alliances with others who share the condition of being less developed and less powerful. The initial delinking allows for negotiating new linkages in the way which is most advantageous. Most developing countries have benefited much from the ability to negotiate with inter-imperialist rivalries.

A fourth important dimension is a conscious policy of decentralization, so that a nation is not dominated by one great metropolitan centre but has many local and regional poles of development. Local governmental units are given greater autonomy and responsibility. There is a rich growth of local community and regional media, educational facilities, professional services and cultural expression. The initiatives in development will be taken more at the local and regional level, and the central state government enjoys relatively less power. This makes it more difficult for national elites to dominate the development process, concentrate wealth and prestige symbols in a single urban-technical sector and exert monopoly control of the political activity of the nation.

Fourth, if development must be based on local initiatives and be self-reliant, every unit of development will have its own particular model and there will be multiple paths of development. This implies a rejection of the modernization thesis, which defines development in terms of an implantation of western rationality and entrepreneurial values. Servaes places great emphasis on every nation, region and community seeking a strong sense of its own local, cultural

identity. Indeed, he would consider having a conscious awareness of unique cultural values as a central goal of development, as important as economic productivity. This strikes at the heart of dependency and the measurement of development in terms of the adoption of a style of life around particular models of advanced technology. The emphasis on a technologically defined model of development almost always splits a nation into high-tech and backward sectors. Far more important is to emphasize a common culture, equitable distribution of wealth and education, resolution of basic health and welfare needs, more labour-intensive industries, a somewhat slower pace of general productivity increase based on indigenous resources, and a strong development of civil society. Given a strong development of local community institutions on the basis of decentralization, the reference point for the quality of life is more the regional culture than the metropolitan culture. This stronger sense of local and regional cultural identity provides a basis for the deconstruction of the ideological hegemony of urban-technical elites.

The multiplicity model is closely related to a fifth theoretical premise, namely, that development must be primarily defined in cultural (Servaes, 1999: 59–76) rather than economic or political terms. Servaes emphasizes culture as the arena of the struggle for empowerment, in part because the new nations and movements for empowerment have themselves insisted that affirmation of independent cultural identity is the heart of the matter. Technology, economic and political systems are themselves cultural constructs. Servaes rightly, in my view, locates the ‘struggle’ for cultural identity within a theory of ideology taken from the critical cultural studies tradition derived from Gramsci, Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe, and especially Stuart Hall. The modernization and ‘nation building’ (with many elements of dependency theory) paradigms are so insidious because they pretend to be ‘culture free’, presenting universalistic technological, economic and political instruments for development. ‘Both the so-called modernization and dependency paradigms, for obviously quite opposite reasons, start from the assumption that as societies develop, they lose their separate identities and cultural differences and tend to converge toward one common type of society’ (Servaes, 1999: 65). A major role of theories of communication for development is to systematically ‘unmask’ these ideological distortions or, better, point to the cultural movements which are simultaneously revealing ideological distortions, affirming cultural identity and finding ways of resisting cultural hegemony.

Servaes recognizes the importance of political-economic power in propagating cultural imperialism (Hamelink, 1983), but he draws on the theories of Latin Americans such as Martin-Barbero, Canclini and Pasquali to explain how the popular classes are continually constructing new cultural identities in the face of hegemony. Servaes opts for models of communication and development education that are focused on the struggle with ideology and giving people capacity to be the constructors of identity and culture. He stresses the importance of the presence of ideological defence of concentration of power in language and logic and the need for a development education which systematically deconstructs the ideologies in language, media, rituals and all institutions.

Finally, Servaes introduces a framework for participatory planning and

policy which would incorporate initiatives of organizations from the grass-roots level. This assumes that there are central planning bodies, but that these agencies are basing their planning on the structure of organizations representing grass-roots initiative. The central element in this is an information-gathering approach based on participatory research methods. The major objective of the information gathering is not just to pass information to central decision-makers, but to pass the information to the representative organizations so that the policy proposals come from the people (Servaes, 1999: 109–17).

### **The Motivational Dimension: S.R. Melkote and H.L. Steeves**

In contrast to the social structuralist approach of Jan Servaes, Melkote and Steeves have continued to emphasize the Weberian role of personal perceptions and motivations in development.

A unique contribution of Melkote and Steeves is to show the importance for development of religion and, specifically, the liberation theology dimension of major religions. This carries on the tradition of Weber, who analysed how religion contributes to development, but they stand Weber on his head in the sense that Weber argued that the more mystical, transcendent and spiritual elements are generally an obstacle to development while a religion promoting instrumental rationality such as the Calvinist Protestant ethic promotes development. Melkote and Steeves bring forward evidence to show that it is precisely the mystical, transcendent and paradoxical logics of religion that are factors in development. The difference with Weber is that these authors have the advantage of now seeing that the instrumental rationality and capitalist ethic so esteemed by Weber have, in fact, become a major cause of the concentration of social power which is blocking development. The liberation theology dimension of religion can be a major contribution to personal and social empowerment. In many ways, Melkote and Steeves are following recent radical changes in the sociology of religion that see religion as a factor of social change.

What Melkote and Steeves (2001) say about the role of religion might serve as a check-list to apply to other movements or organizations of civil society which attempt to move away from the logic of instrumental rationality and power:

- Religion presents a universalistic, transcendent set of values which stresses universal human dignity, human rights and human freedoms.
- Religion (at least the liberation theology approach to religion) sees injustice and concentration of social power as contradictory to transcendent values and condemns these injustices.
- Virtually all major religions promote a base community which encourages dialogue, solidarity and activities to create social integration, the basis of grass-roots organizations.
- Religion proposes a utopian vision of society and provides liminal, ritual occasions for 'rethinking' social contexts in a paradoxical logic that questions power. That is, all major religions would hold that symbols of perfection are humility and service (not power). The logic of religion leads towards

the questioning of concentrations of power and the questioning of utopias societies which instrumentalize human beings.

- Religions develop a process of education for liberation and can build up an extensive educational infrastructure at the grass-roots level. The sense of volunteerism and dedication promotes a form of low-cost, committed service to the poor.
- Religions, in their reformed, liberation stages, avoid identification with political power. This tends to delegitimize concentration of social power and legitimates empowerment in terms of re-evaluating marginalized cultural identities.
- Religious movements are, in themselves, a network of alternative communication, counterbalancing the control of communication systems by power elites.

What is perhaps lacking in the argument of Melkote and Steeves regarding the role of liberation theologies in the process of development is the analysis of how all institutions are susceptible to hegemonic formations. Hegemony tends to sweep up all into its cultural ideologies and draw them into alliances with powerful elites. Religious organizations are a prime example of this, but all movements seeking to empower the powerless are susceptible to this.

### **From 'Extension Agent' to Development Support Worker**

One of the most significant changes in the development field is the abandonment (at least at the research level) of the classical 'extension model' in agriculture, health and other development services. The assumption was that the research had produced a package of improved practices that would transform the 'ignorant' customs of peasant farmers or other recipients. The extensive research on indigenous knowledge systems (Chambers et al., 1989; Warren et al., 1999) and indigenous agricultural or health systems revealed that farmers often have developed a maximum productivity given the factors they have to work with (Scoones and Thompson, 1994). Farmers are continually making improvements, when these are warranted. The best way to improve practices is to create a situation in which people can improve the innovation process they are already using. Discussion groups, information exchange and neighbourhood-level experimental plots are all helpful, but above all the people must make the decisions. This handing decisions back to the development beneficiaries in one of most significant moves towards empowerment.

Melkote and Steeves incorporate this thinking in their proposal of 'Development Support Communication' and the 'Development Support Communicator'. The publications of Shirley White and K.S. Nair (S. White et al., 1994; S. White, 1999) have also helped to define this new approach and to gather a wealth of experiences in what they call the 'catalyst communicator'. The essential characteristics of this model, somewhat freely adapted in terms of my own experience of this, are as follows:

- Development activities are carried out by an independent organization, democratically run by the beneficiaries through their own managers, not by a bureaucracy controlled remotely by elites. Typical examples are cooperatives, independent people's community organizations and farmers' unions. These organizations are often formed in some degree of opposition to official bureaucracy in contexts where bureaucracies realize that they are a failure and can do nothing but turn the process over to the people.
- The Development Support Communication professional is a kind of facilitator of people's organizations. This kind of professional may be important when people's organizations are just getting started. Mature organizations will have their own educational and service personnel.
- Expert services are offered to the people in a form of contractual agreement or alliance in which people's organizations can take what they want and use the information as they wish. People's organizations may carry out their own research and teaching functions.
- The people's organizations in regional or national alliances demand the right to participate in all government ministry decisions. A major objective is to give to representative federations of these grass-roots organizations a role in the governing board of agricultural or other ministries. Where the major beneficiaries of government services are the members of the people's organization, they would demand that their members be given priority access to services.
- The service providers, working under a policy favourable to the people's organizations, would reserve the right to establish the conditions of good use of services provided.
- People's organizations would make universal democratization and the networking of people's organizations the unifying national policy in governmental and other major institutions.
- Service provision would go hand-in-hand with education to run people's organizations – the heart of the empowerment process.

Interestingly enough, these approaches are not particularly new. The model was clearly established in numerous institutions in the late 1800s and early 1900s in the form of the union movement, the cooperative movement and many other movements. Unfortunately, hegemonic interests which have controlled development institutions (such as the agricultural colleges and the rural extension systems) in the US and in some European countries opposed independent people's organizations from the beginning and propagated the modernization paradigm. Their primary interest was to continue to use the development bureaucracies as a form of hegemonic social control.

What is still lacking in the work of Melkote and Steeves and White and Nair is the explanation of how groups come into existence and reach the stage of being ready for catalyst action from service providers. More important, how do local groups develop into large-scale organizations aiming to transform the power structures around them? The recent research on social movements and the use of media in movements develops the idea of Servaes that movements are the major *actors* in the development process.

## **Addressing the Problem of Concentrations of Social Power: Arturo Escobar and Sonia Alvarez**

The research on social movements would argue that it makes little sense to talk of participatory communication, grass-roots initiatives or communication catalysts if there is not change in the power dynamics of developing countries that reallocates resources to the urban and rural poor. In virtually all developing countries the urban-technical sector controls government spending and professional services for its own interests. The efforts of poor communities to 'pull themselves up by their own bootstraps' in a fairly isolated fashion plays into the hands of the neoliberal promoters of individual efforts in the marketplace. 'An alternative view of citizenship . . . would view democratic struggles as encompassing a redefinition not only of the political system but also of economic, social, and cultural practices that might engender a democratic ordering for society as a whole' (Alvarez et al., 1998: 2).

There has been change, however, in the thinking of how social movements will bring about changes in the power structure. Developing societies have become far more urban, differentiated and complex with a multiplicity of actors. Economies and politics are less industrially oriented and more service and information oriented. There are not just a few major actors such as the peasants, workers and a united revolutionary vanguard attempting to get control of relatively immutable state structures. The possibility of a united proletarian alliance confronting elite social classes in a single, great revolutionary upheaval seems increasingly remote. There are a 'multiplicity of social actors establishing their presence and spheres of autonomy in a fragmented social and political space' (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992: 3).

A general characteristic of the movements for social change, especially in the Latin American context, is a shift of the confrontations from the economic to the cultural level. The goal is not simply getting control of the state and the political apparatus, but rather to resignify what is meant by democracy. In the Latin American region, the rationalist, universalist and individualist symbols were transformed into a defence of oligarchical, clientelistic and hierarchical exclusionary systems. In this context, the goal of movements is a process of resignification of terms such as liberal democracy which have lost their original meaning.

Movements among the indigenous Indian or Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Colombian movements in Latin America are examples of attempts to resignify ethnic and racial identity to their own people and in the hegemonic cultural system of the nation as a whole. To carry out this process of resignification, the movements must establish their own internal media system and recuperate the hybridization of the indigenous with the modern. It is possible to become modern and retain an indigenous Indian identity. Many of these movements are affirming the identity of their regions and the importance of these regions in national development. Getting access to resources of the nation is essential. Although Afro-Brazilians form 50 percent of the population, only 2 percent of the university students are Afro-Brazilian. To gain access, however, the nation must see these minority groups as culturally essential.

A second major goal of the movements is to resignify the political process (Alvarez et al., 1998: 5). Typically, these movements are introducing the practices of direct popular participation in the decisions, something formerly reserved to political parties. The people's organizations demand accountability from their own leadership and from the political leaders who agree to support them. The movements are introducing a series of new actors in the form of the coalition of movements in the city. The political discourse moves from interests and clientelistic favours to the rights of people and the continual evaluation of whether these rights are being realized.

A third aspect of these seemingly fragmented movements is to link the everyday protests, manifestations and confrontations to a broader political process. The discussions going on in market stalls, local bars, family courtyards became important sites of discussion of their exclusion, their exploitation, the depreciation of their identities. These submerged networks, at certain points in time, have linked into major urban social movements. The resignifying process going on in rather informal discussion becomes part of the demands that larger movements put forward.

Most of the issues of these movements tend to focus on the implementation of the legislation and concessions already made. At other times, local movements tend to network into major sets of alliances. When a popular leader such as Lula in Brazil builds an enormously complex set of agreements, literally thousands of little, seemingly fragmented movements are linked into a new political vision. The articulation of the demands may still take years, but such a move promises to bring into play all of the 'creeping' resignification of identities, the legitimation of much of the gradual resignification of the political process. At the same time, building alliances means negotiation with the immensely blurred landscape of NGOs and counter-signification of neoliberal moves.

The failure of popular alliances and movements such as the NWICO (New World Information and Communication Order), which were based on binary analysis of power and democratization, has led to a rethinking of the role of communication for democratization (Rodriguez, 2001). Huesca and Dervin (1994) argue that the tendency to define issues in terms of 'vertical communication versus horizontal communication, communication for domination versus communication for liberation, and communication as information versus communication as dialogue [has] led to a theoretical confusion which does not correspond to the reality and cuts off the most significant possibilities for democratization'. Dervin and Huesca (1997) have described participatory communication as 'verbing' to emphasize that no theory is final or complete. Power needs to be continuously renegotiated, and today's formula for liberation becomes tomorrow's distorting ideology. There needs to be a continuous dialogue of knowledges.

Fundamental to this is the argument that citizenship is not primarily a legal status but a form of expression of identity, something to be constructed and reconstructed (Rodriguez, 2001: 19; Mouffe, 1992). Citizens have to enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis by their participation in everyday political practices. 'As citizens actively participate in actions that reshape their own

identities, the identities of others and their social environment, they produce power' (Rodriguez, 2001: 19). Empowerment emerges from relationships in particular places and organizations such as families, friend groups, church, neighbourhood, workplace, community, town and city. As Wolin (1992: 252) states, 'These relationships are the sources from which political beings draw power – symbolic, material, and psychological – and that enables them to act together.' The actions of voting may be less important than contesting given identities, languages and relationships. Clemencia Rodriguez suggests that the term 'alternative' leads into the binary trap and prefers the term of citizen media (Rodriguez, 2001: 20). Citizen media imply that collectivities are *enacting* citizenship by transforming the mediascape, contesting legitimized identities and introducing new communication practices contrary to the mass, homogenized, uniform cultural categories. This conception of democratization points to contestatory action dealing with varied and fragmented forms of oppression touching on many facets of identity in a person.

In this conception of movements, the multiplication of contestatory activities in everyday life is important, even if these are relatively short lived. Each action leaves its imprint on the collective memory. Where groups have experienced this enactment of citizenship, they are far more open to seeing community activities as opportunities for contestation. Democratization is not a once and for all phenomenon but a continuous redistribution of power in the face of continuous concentration. Change is measured more by the gradual appearance of a 'new generation' and a new culture which affirms new identities.

## **The Role of Media in Dissident Movements**

In a more reflexive society, the media play an increasing role, but the major focus of the new movements is the reformulation of the media language in order to redefine and re-evaluate the identities of the protagonists in the movements. The focus on how movements, large and small, use media has tended to move away from a binary analysis of the powerless getting control of the media for purposes of mobilization, to the ways that people use media in micro contexts. At times, people articulate alternative readings of the big media in informal meetings and this is put into media form at least within the circuits of those who share similar identities (Jenkins, 1992).

The expansion of small group and community media increasingly allows all to become producers of media discourses and to affirm their perception of reality to themselves and to others in the community (Rodriguez, 2001). Citizens' media tend to be local, about supposedly everyday events, produced by people in the local groups for their own discussion or for exchange with other groups. Often citizens' media are not directly questioning power relationships but simply celebrating local culture and local people. The building up of confidence about the value of one's culture lays the groundwork for legitimating contestatory action. Community 'animation radio', for example, deliberately opens a space for less powerful groups to express their oppressions and to bring this out into the open community debate. A skilful animator anchor person will detect when protests against misuse by more powerful persons begin to emerge

and will lead this into an open discussion of this from all points of view. This kind of media deliberately avoids getting attached to mass audiences so that it is possible to respond to the momentary, fragmented violations of human dignity and equality in daily life (Downing, 2000). At times, hundreds of little movements may come together in a large movement, but they resist becoming too institutionalized. The programming and themes may be continually changing, fluid, contingent on response and support. If there is no response, the effort dies or changes (Dervin and Huesca, 1997; Huesca and Dervin, 1994).

## **The Centrality of Research on Gender Issues**

Research on ways to improve the conditions for women in development is generally a priority because so much of agricultural production, small industries, improvement of health and education and such local community improvement as schools and clean water depends on women. Change in communication patterns is essential for development because women are blocked by arbitrary cultural discourses that divert resources away from women or which prevent women from getting into positions of decision-making. Earlier research focused on how to help women get into more central positions 'in a man's world'. Increasingly the emphasis is on the structural, institutional changing of the world so that all essentialist conceptions of gender, race, ethnicity, age and other identities are swept away and it becomes a more human world of equal citizens (Einsiedel, 2000). Since meanings are defined in the process of communication, a great deal of importance is given currently to discursive practices which structure world views.

Much research on gender issues deals with changes in the very conception of communication. In order to give women a central role it is necessary to remove hierarchical, centralized, one-way patterns of communication which have characterized, for example, extension of new technology from centres of research to rural communities. So much of the extension mentality emphasized a certain kind of male-centred rationality and individualistic, competitive entrepreneurial action. Instead, a space is opened for a more participatory, dialogical, non-directive and horizontal communication, which enables all in the group to gradually come into the decision-making and make a contribution to collective action. Communication is not centred on the production of definitive messages that can be 'transmitted' by a powerful source to passive receivers, but is seen as an ongoing process that sees all as transmitters and all as receivers. Recent programmes of community radio, community video production and popular theatre have enabled women to reject hierarchical discourses and create a new mediated discourse in which their identities become part of the discourse. This can radically change accepted 'media languages' (Rodriguez, 2001: 109–28).

Pilar Riaño (1994) outlines three key areas of research and action on gender issues. The first is to provide a space and a process for the articulation of women's competencies linked to their personal experience, their family experience and their experience in groups. Since women are so central in development at the community and regional levels, this experience has to be channelled into

decisions at the community level and to linkages with development organizations. Second, women's media production competencies need to be developed in all media from group and community to national and international media. Third, women need to develop their capacities as sociopolitical actors both as protagonists in popular movements and popular networking alliances and as representatives in governmental organizations.

## **Responses to the Neoliberal Development Policies**

The research community dealing with communication and development is almost unanimous in the view that neoliberal and structural adjustment policies have brought greater concentration of social power and greater poverty and dependency in the developing world. The neoliberal doctrine entered as an answer to the stalemate between violent dictatorships and equally violent popular revolutions. The debt crisis has also been a major factor (Bulmer-Thomas, 1996: 310). The great popular movements in the late 1970s and 1980s in countries such as Brazil and Chile in Latin America or the moves away from corrupt one-party governments in Africa tended to lead into social orders that define freedom as the free market. All moral, normative criteria for defending human rights or guaranteeing even a basic human existence are undermined. The invisible hand of the market will somehow bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number. Popular movements were and are aiming at establishing the civil society, but just how the weak and incipient forms of civil society in these countries are to deal with the power and resources of international capitalism has never been very clear.

Some of the most perceptive critical evaluations of the 'new economic model' argue that the response lies in the new social movements, especially in the Latin American context (Veltmeyer et al., 1997: 225–9). The new movements tend to focus on delegitimation of cultural ideologies and the re-evaluation of devalued identities of women, excluded racial groups, the poor, ethnic groups and other marginal sectors. The open, free society cannot bring justice unless all cultural capitals are validated. The new movements are also attempting to counter the radical individualism and alienation of liberalism by defining and affirming a new social morality based on citizenship, human rights, participation, dialogue and communitarian values. The proposals for a new international order did not succeed in part because they attempted to introduce a new legal order before some consensus on a moral order was reached.

The reason the new movements are tending to focus more on the construction of meaning rather than simply mobilizing numbers for political power or getting control of the state apparatus is that unless the conceptions of power and the state are changed, nothing has changed. The objective is not a particular organization of society but an ongoing process, a 'verbing' as Dervin and Huesca argue.

Neoliberalism succeeds only to the extent that its ideological assumptions are accepted. The new movements want to establish a space of free, participatory dialogue in which these assumptions can be debated. Huesca describes how a movement among the women who work in the assembly plants along the

US–Mexican border came to question that the only response to the neoliberal premise that 'the laws of the market are inflexible' is acceptance. In discussions, the values of 'defending oneself' and 'not taking it' emerged (Huesca, 2000: 78–9). In other contexts, the premise that decisions must be made by professional *male* management is countered by a movement which 'opens the market' for women to enter into professional roles and into community or regional policy-making roles (Taylor, 1994).

All of these movements contest the neoliberal conception of media. The production of media is participatory in order to allow marginal groups to define the text from their perspective and then to stand back and appropriate the meaning that has been projected. A sociodrama, video or radio programme may be continually reformulated until it expresses the deeply felt identity of the participants. Citizens' media provide a space of freedom in which all can debate an issue and reconstruct human relations freely (Rodriguez, 2001). Often citizens' media become very popular and the temptation is to become mass media, but this is resisted because it means being swept into the marketplace and taking on the ideological assumptions of the mass, market-oriented media.

## The Processes of Hybridization of Cultures

Strongly questioned are the binary, evolutionary, deterministic conceptions of cultural change and development from traditional to modern, folk to urban, communitarian to complex societies, communalistic to individualistic, local to global. Not only are there multiple paths to more complex societies, as Servaes has argued, but persons, communities and countries are 'concocting' a bewildering variety of mixtures and hybridization of cultures.

This does not deny the importance of identifying the different normative patterns of communication in different cultures of the world. Moemeka (1997), for example, argues that African communication values are communalistic, at least in the pure stage in rural villages which have fewer culture contacts. It may well be a valid hypothesis that Buddhism or Confucianism establish what Victor Turner has called a root cultural paradigm, with a root paradigm of communication values. Theories of hybridization of cultures suggest how these paradigms evolve in different cultural contexts.

Earlier theories of cultural imperialism and cultural synchronization have proved to be oversimplifications when more ethnographic descriptions are carried out, especially the ethnography of urban movements and the formation of popular cultures (Martin-Barbero, 1993). The analyses of how new urban settlements or new movements create their culture show that these communities mix together whatever symbols and images are useful to make sense of the context. Much of the recent research on rural development has shown that initiatives to build networks of rural organizations are most successful when they build on the traditional forms of organization. The forms of organization which emerge are not traditional or an imitation of a model from another context, but something quite unique and useful for the particular context. The same is true for developing agricultural credit systems, cooperative activities, women's organizations and virtually any other development activity.

There are various theoretical models of this building of local cultures. The 'mixtures' model portrays a new urban community 'pulling into a discourse' a variety of symbols from different cultural sources – traditional indigenous, modernizing, local and transnational media texts, the rhetoric of new political movements, etc. – whatever strikes a sympathetic chord in listeners and will move them to action (Martin-Barbero, 1993). The hybridization metaphor is similar but tends to stress the grafting of new symbols onto a strong local culture in a way that transforms the new into the logic of the root paradigm. The peasant familism does not disappear in the city (Garcia-Canclini, 1995: 208). An example is the introduction of individualistic entrepreneurial activities into a strongly familistic culture. Individuals are encouraged to start new enterprises with personal success, but then to use the financial and other forms of power gained for the good of the whole family.

Another model is cultural revitalization in a context in which an old pattern of meaning has collapsed or people are transposed by migration into a new situation (Wallace, 1956). Movements, often led by a prophetic personality, propose a new way of life around a new central set of central symbols that totally reorganize old symbols in kaleidoscopic fashion. An example of this is Japan after the Second World War, which reorganized its cultural motivational symbols quite profoundly. Many Asian countries have gone through a cultural revitalization movement in which values such as Confucianism take on quite different meanings. Still another model is the struggle of local communities with hegemonic institutions to define their own identity. This often becomes a struggle with other actors to define the meaning of a space in which all of the actors are stakeholders. For example, city planners may find that recent immigrants and 'old powerful families' have vastly different ideas of how the city should develop, but all live in the city and have a stake in its future.

There is general consensus that the hybridization process generally produces the best solutions to local problems (Warren et al., 1999). The key to allowing this to happen is opening a free space in which all actors have an equal opportunity to participate and to engage in dialogue in a way that allows all stakeholders to make sure that their moral claims are worked into a final solution. In the end, all stakeholders can recognize their culture in the final decision of the group and the final course of action. This requires an animating, non-directive type of leadership which ensures that all participate and are seriously taken into consideration. This approach recognizes that cultural practices are part of a functioning, adaptive system and new elements will be integrated into an ongoing system. A model of this logic is the farming systems approach which accepts that peasant farmers manage an intricately balanced production system and that they know how and when their practices should be changed (Scoones and Thompson, 1994).

## **Moving Civil Conflict to Cultural Negotiation**

Virtually every developing country in the world is experiencing major civil conflict, which is discouraging investment and economic development,

disrupting education, creating situations in which more flexible civil society is banned and justifying the concentration of political power.

The ideal is a nation in which different cultural-linguistic groups are allowed the freedom to maintain their cultural identity in a context of growing national unity (Young, 1976). South Africa seems to have set its foot on this path.

The most important step is a policy of recognizing that civil conflicts are, fundamentally, cultural conflicts even when the immediate causes of conflict are economic and political exclusion. Armed conflict must be moved to the level of cultural conflict. It is also important to set in motion a process of cultural negotiation which will gradually lead all cultural groups to see that the richness of cultural diversity is to the advantage of all cultural groups (R. White, 1999). The media policy of a nation is particularly important for this because it is in this forum that different cultural groups interact and negotiate (R. White, 1990, 2000).

### **Is Empowerment the Answer?**

The current research on communication for development tends to stress, rightly I would say, that empowerment is the affirming of the dignity and value of one's own identity and re-evaluation of the local culture. It also means resignifying the cultural institutions so that one's own cultural capital is given greater recognition and is seen as more valuable. The resignification is also important so that the price of changing power relations is not to give up one's own identity. With the premise that all cultural identities that contribute to justice and community are valued, the world needs a rich variety of cultural identities.

The concept of empowerment, as it has been developed so far, is, at best, incomplete and possibly dangerous if it is not oriented more clearly towards the service of society. Empowerment needs to be explicitly located within a broader framework of commonly agreed upon parameters of human and social equity. The history of development theory is littered with paradigms such as modernization, the strong state and popular alliances that have ended with the empowerment of one set of interests to the exclusion of other groups. The modernization paradigm, for example, clearly favoured the economic and technical entrepreneurs as the 'engines' of development to the exclusion of lower-status urban and rural sectors.

One framework which has broad cultural and political acceptance is the language of human and collective rights. Human rights are constructs with a formulation that can be discussed, further developed and adapted to different cultural contexts. Human rights also have a long history of legal and moral foundation. The continued strong debate about human rights is one indicator that these are cultural symbols that can be interpreted somewhat differently by different social groups.

The major human rights charters, beginning with the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the series of human rights conventions of the UN over the past 40 years, have made steady progress in clarifying the definition of human rights and getting the support of national governments (Linden,

1998). Increasingly, the abuses of power by governments are being critiqued in terms of the human rights agreements which these states have signed. This is providing some common framework of policy for international relations, national development and for the defence of movements of minority groups. In many ways, human rights have proved to be a better framework for policy than the language of the 'New World Orders' which was much too vague and binary for today's perception of world politics.

Most of the theory of communication and development is from the point of view of government or NGO agencies involved with an intervention to help less powerful groups. If one enters into the life situation of the rural and urban poor there is, of course, a question of respect for identity, but life is one long desperate search for a job, resources to get children into schools, finding adequate housing, getting proper medical attention and the money to pay for this, ensuring good production and the marketing of products, and a host of other needs. To get these resources, one builds alliance with resource agencies such as the government services or services of an NGO. Having the support of a family network or a clientelistic network of politician friends is extremely important. In rural areas or huge urban slum areas, good services simply are not available or are overwhelmed with requests that they cannot serve. These clientelistic systems survive by providing individual favours. They continue to exist because of a hierarchical structure of power. There is no such thing as the universal right to education or the right to health. It depends on who you know and your access to the 'private' control of resources.

The change of this system seeks to affirm a series of universal rights. These various movements are attempting to resignify power from being a clientelistic response of helping a friend to being a service to citizens. It also means re-organizing the whole system of services from depending on paternalistic government agencies to depending on a people's organization that makes certain that the services are provided because you have a right to them. Among these rights is the right to information and the right to communicate. The new movements seek to affirm this culture of universal human rights, at least within the movement, and to avoid being coopted back into the culture of power and clientelism.

It is at this point that one may ask if 'empowerment' and 'power' are, in themselves, a sufficient basis for policy and for theory of communication and development. Perhaps more important is the culture of service, the culture of dialogue and community and the culture of human rights (Hamelink, 1994: 284–316). A strategy of empowerment needs, perhaps, to be located within a broader framework of universal human rights. Too often, when movements do achieve the empowerment they are seeking, they feel that they have arrived at their goal. They have redefined their own identity and they are widely accepted. The logic of empowerment causes no sense of urgency to use their power to serve others in a similar situation. The logic of a discourse of human rights or other universalistic discourse affirms that no right is secure unless it is universally respected and implemented. When one enters into the histories of responses to people's needs for services, usually an organizational structure has been created which ensures that these services are provided and that those providing services

are made accountable to the public. We need a kind of research which follows through the history of interventions, movements and people's organizations and which sees how this has been organized and sustained over a long period of time. Empowerment may be the answer in terms of an immediate response to a situation, but we need to see how this strategy has worked over a longer period of time. We need to see if we are arriving at universal respect for all human rights throughout the society.

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