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Keynote Address

By

Henrikas Yushkiavitshus
Communication, culture and development are closely linked. There would be no need to repeat this again and again if the principal decisions at international or national levels dealing with development did not very often neglect communication and culture.

Development is frequently perceived only as economic growth. If we consider economic growth only as percentage figures of Gross National Product (GNP), Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or other statistics that provide national profiles in macro-economic terms, the world record of the past decades may seem to be impressive.

If we analyze the data further, however, to see how these gains have been shared among the populations, how they have participated in GNP in terms of employment, buying power, consumerism, literacy and education, a fuller sharing in the social and cultural fruits of society, in a word, how economic growth has been democratized, the eventual picture may be less positive.

There has of course been economic growth in the world. The difficulty is that purely economic growth has not led in every case to living wisely, agreeably and well. In many cases, economic growth has created disparities, leading to what is today called exclusion, a term that covers everything from exploitation to poverty, plain and simple.

Today the richest fifth of the world’s population has garnered 84 per cent of the world’s Gross National Product (GNP) while the share of the poorest fifth was only 1.4 per cent of GNP,
0.9 per cent of world trade, 0.7 per cent of world savings and 0.9 per cent of domestic investment. Within a span of 30 years, the disparity between the incomes of these two extreme groups has increased from 30:1 to 60:1. Through purely economic growth, exclusion, the disparity between the rich and the poor, is increasing.

It is perhaps not the kind of economic growth that we all want. It is not the kind of economic growth that can be associated with democratization. It can even be counter-democratic.

Many sociologists and economists point to the ending of the Cold War and the break-up of the former Soviet Union as major turning points in history, the beginning of a period of peace. The ending of state socialism has closed a chapter of one economic system, and opened several new chapters in defining and building new economies and new democracies.

And here we come to the importance of culture, of cultural setting.

The post-Cold War period has shown that attempts to transform new democracies into the mirror image of one already existing in another cultural setting, as a rule, have not been successful. Saks, an American adviser to the Russian Government admitted frankly: "We felt like we were invited to treat a sick person, but when we put him on the operating table and opened him up, we suddenly found that he had an absolutely different anatomy and organs, which we had not studied in our medical institute'.

Today more and more often the question is put: does economic growth have priority over such issues as basic freedoms, human rights and other democratic values? Can these objectives be achieved at the same time?

Even among the media, the question is often asked: what is journalism, mission or business? I very often quote Adam Michnik, the well-known Polish journalist, who together with President Walesa spent some years in prison. He said: "Journalism is both mission and business. Journalism without business is bankruptcy. And journalism without mission is cynicism."

Economic growth cannot be the sole objective of humanity. Economic growth for what? For all to live wisely and agreeably and well? Or for more money in the hands of the few?

The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Aung San Sun Kyi, in her address to the UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development, stated last year: "The true development of human beings involves much more than mere economic growth. At its heart, there must be a sense of empowerment and inner fulfilment." (Aung San Sun Kyi: "Democracy, the Common Heritage of Humanity", extracts from an address delivered by former President Aquino on the author’s behalf at the UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development held in Manila, 21 November 1994, in the UNESCO Courrier, Paris, UNESCO, March 1995).

The same concept was stressed by Federico Mayor, the Director-General of UNESCO in his Position Paper for the World Summit for Social Development "That development is a comprehensive process, as UNESCO has been advocating for decades, is now agreed upon by the international community. Beyond economic growth, which is an engine and not an end in itself, development is first and foremost social; it is also intimately linked to peace, human rights, democratic governance, environment, and last but not least, the culture and life-style of the
people" (Federico Mayor, Position Paper for the World Summit for Social Development, Paris, UNESCO, 1994.)

So development is clearly linked to culture. Development implies change. It creates new demands, introduces new technologies. It is a continuous process, and seen from a philosophical perspective it fits well with the Buddhist concept of impermanence which is familiar to many Asian cultures.

Apart from this commonness each development phase is unique to itself. There is no exact precedence we could follow except the historical experiences of failures and success which reflect the common aspiration for improvement. There is no uniformity or precise formulas for development. They are based on various ideologies, cultures and experiences. Various innovations were developed and applied by the people of different societies in the past to solve some practical problems. Take the case of medicine where various treatment systems such as Ayurveda, Yunani, Acupuncture, etc. were developed to identify and solve the same problems of health and illness. Or take the case of the very fundamental need of building shelters, where different societies came out with different solutions unique to each culture and development.

There is no question that similar problems can be addressed in different ways and the solution depends on natural and cultural environments unique to each society. It also depends on willingness to accept experiences already existing inside or coming from outside.

Flexibility in acceptance very much depends on the cultural confidence and the degree of education a society is enjoying. The culturally confident societies do not replicate directly the development experiences of other societies; they take these experiences through the filters of their own cultural identities.

Japan’s system of life-long employment, based on workers’ loyalty, solidarity and active participation, has delivered a high level of productivity. Interaction between the indigenous value system and the borrowed economic policies have led to a better economic and social environment for the majority of the people. In this case cultural confidence was so high that there was both the willingness and the capacity to assimilate some factors of other cultures and enrich the country, without compromising the fundamental elements of its own culture.

The basic characteristic of human culture is its diversity. It is not a chaotic diversity, but neither is it defined by formulas. The diversity is determined by the ability to grow rather than the wish to stagnate. Culture needs to accommodate changes of social environment caused by development.

With increased globalization, external influences play a greater role in the transformation of beliefs through political, economic, technological and intellectual interactions. Communication plays a pivotal role in globalization. People need information that can be assimilated and interpreted for their advancement in spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional fields. Communication is expected to satisfy the demand of providing necessary information. The urge to know is common to any culture. Sometimes this urge is determined by emotional feelings and sometimes information is needed for practical objectives.

In this respect new communication technologies have provided simplified solutions to serve a large number of people with a vast amount of information. The more information you
receive, the better it helps you to understand the world around you and to develop improved perceptions and judgements.

Of course, cultural implications of the flow of information are very powerful. This is not new. Information has been shaping cultures for centuries except that today many fear the process will be accelerated due to the new communication technologies.

Experience shows that the impact of communication takes a longer time to show its results than the earlier so-called bullet theories had presumed. The studies also show that there is a great difference between the amount of the information available and the amount of information consumed.

So the message is: don’t panic, because the fear of change will not help us to solve the issues that are emerging around us. Fear of change is more reflected in societies which do not have sufficient confidence in their own cultures, especially those which have conflicts within their boundaries or with neighbouring societies.

Domination of Western-orientated cultural productions quite often also creates allergic reactions, but in my opinion, we are approaching a turning point. Recent data indicate that markets are shifting today, gradually often imperceptibly, from the over-familiar West to the as yet, some would say, undefinable East: possibly also from the up-to-now aggressive North to the inscrutable timid South. A small crack appears to be creeping along the walls of the impenetrable world markets, and through this crack the more advanced of the developing countries will crash one day.

Very soon the time will come for others to become senders rather than remaining as mere receivers. Asia is already considered to be a market requiring products based on its own cultural richness. The point is that there is no lack of production skills and creativity anywhere in the world. There may be a lack of technical excellence in several cases, but not creative potential.

Indian cinema alone produces more than 900 films per year. Should these films ever reach an audience beyond its continental borders this would be an immense source for new programmes - three new films every day.

The same is happening on the other side of the world. The audiovisual production of Latin American countries is 500,000 hours per year - four times more than Latin countries in Europe.

Latin American TV broadcasters have only recently made major investments in satellite broadcasting and therefore they have so far only a limited influence on regional and international audiences, but if we can believe the trends, this will change.

Whatever the degree of globalization, the diversity of cultures will remain the most attractive feature of social entities. These problems were always in the focus of UNESCO. Ten years ago, Rajiv Gandhi in his address to UNESCO’s Executive Board raised the questions: what are the prospects for the world’s diverse cultures in an increasingly interconnected world? Is uniformity the inevitable result of the processes of globalization that are so strongly marking the end of this century or shall we prove equal to the task of preserving diversity by respecting difference? What shape is our common future to take - cultural conformity or comity?
UNESCO's position was defined by those who drafted and signed its Constitution 50 years ago. The developing of communication was linked to "preserving the independence, integrity and fruitful diversity of...cultures". Its purpose was to advance "the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples" to "promote the free flow of ideas by word and image" and so to banish the "suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war". UNESCO is unequivocally concerned with diversity and reciprocity. UNESCO is part of the "United" Nations, not the "Unified" Nations.

Under the combined effect of technological advances and the globalization of communication, the maintenance of linguistic and cultural diversity is an important issue. Will young people in the global village wear the same tee-shirt bearing the same slogan, will they sing the same hit-song, will 6,000 or more languages spoken in the world today be reduced to a lingua franca derived from a single culture?

Fortunately, there is every reason to believe that globalization need not be synonymous with cultural conformity.

There is a common misconception also that development of technology leads only to the universality of culture. It can also lead to social and cultural isolation, while religious or ethnic groups unite in their electronic communities, neglecting others. There are televiewers in Paris who, thanks to technological development, watch only Russian television via satellite, or only programmes in the Arabic language, and televiewers in the United States who watch only Spanish-language channels. What has happened to the melting pot?

Cultural and linguistic diversity represents a vital resource. Culture is essential to human identity and therefore to human dignity.

Today real development cannot be dynamic without dynamic development of communication. The information revolution however has challenges and dangers not only in the cultural area. There is a considerable danger that if special efforts are not made, the "information revolution" will increase the gap between developing and developed countries, and generate new gaps between developing and developed countries, and generate new gaps within countries and societies, between those who have access to information and those who are denied this access, between the rich and the poor. High technology may, once again, outrun social justice.

If we look at the basic telecommunications infrastructure in developing countries, we discover that less than two per cent of the World Bank's lending and less than three per cent of regional development banks' lending goes to telecom projects. But we must not be in a hurry to blame the banks or international agencies. Analysis shows that many governments use the revenue from state-owned telecommunications to finance other activities. Despite the fact that investments required for setting up modern telecommunications structures are relatively modest compared to other development sectors, priority to communications projects is very low, both in assistance programmes and in national development plans.

Today, when someone speaks about communication, the most used words are information highways. The concept, which has been discussed for many years by engineers, has suddenly become a key word for politicians, economists, philosophers, educators and, of course, communication specialists. The information highways are perceived by industrialized countries as factors for boosting the economy, employment and consumption. However if economic
objectives constitute the major driving force, governments are also assigning social, cultural, educational and scientific goals to new services and information highways.

In his keynote address to ITU's World Telecommunication Development Conference (Buenos Aires, March 1994) US Vice-President Al Gore called for the establishment of a Global Information Infrastructure (GII) for international action "to determine how every school and library in every country can be connected to Internet, the world’s largest computer network, in order to create a Global Digital Library. Each library could maintain a server containing books and journals in electronic form, along with indexes to help users find other materials. As more and more information is stored electronically, this global library could become more and more useful. It could allow millions of students, scholars and business people to find the information they need whether in Albania or Ecuador."

The report to the French Government by Gérard Théry "Les autoroutes de l’information" foresees among other advances in this area: new electronic publishing opportunities for French newspaper and book publishing companies; new audiovisual activities combining television and telecommunications; the renewal of the great tradition of French public service in education, medicine, libraries and museums.

In Japan, the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation intends to wire every school, home and office with fibre optic cable but in the year 2015, at an estimated cost varying between US $150 billion and US $230 billion.

The report of the Telecommunications Council of the Japanese Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, "Reforms towards the intellectually creative society of the 21st century", considers that information technologies will enable a comfortable lifestyle, reflecting a shift away from material wealth to the spiritual quality of life, will promote mutual understanding of cultures between Japan and other countries, and will permit environmental problems to be addressed efficiently.

The report of Canada’s Ministry of Industry on the Canadian Information Highway states that the "information highway will stimulate the development of an enormous range of education, training and lifelong learning applications that will provide access to courses, libraries, museums, specialized databases and other people, regardless of location."

The G-7 Ministerial Conference on the Information Society that took place last February stressed that "the smooth and effective transition towards the information society is one of the most important tasks that should be undertaken in the last decade of the 20th century" and that "countries in transition and developing countries must be provided with the chance to fully participate in this process as it will open opportunities for them to leapfrog stages of technology development and to stimulate social and economic development".

This is how it is presented in official papers, but I have to say that reaction to the G-7 proposal was not universally positive. For example, professional organizations representing the media are concerned that very often the approach to the information society is guided only by a market-oriented position and that the public relations lobby in several high-level discussions had left aside the question of content and the role of media in the new technological environment.
UNESCO shares the concern of media professionals that new electronic information systems have to transmit a wide variety of opinions in the same way as existing media, and that information which is not commercially profitable or is only of interest to social minorities continues to be available.

It is not true that technology always leads to the universalization of culture. Gutenberg's invention of book printing ended the monopoly of Greek and Latin languages in European science and art and led to the reinforcement of national languages and national cultures.

The development of information highways raised in a more acute way the major ethical and legal issues and also privacy of information, because of increased access to interconnected networks and databases. The right of individuals to accede to personal data concerning them is becoming more and more important. We are all in databases, and if we are lucky, the information is correct. If not, not. The problem is not easy. A wave of terrorism is sweeping across the world. We want security, but we also want privacy. How much are we ready to trade off?

Multimedia and information highways also considerably affect copyright issues: how can author's intellectual property rights be preserved in this moving environment where artistic, integrity and moral rights are endangered by new technological possibilities of mutilation, modification and worldwide distribution of distorted work through information highways.

The information highways give a new dimension to the principle of the free flow of information in UNESCO. The principle of the free flow of information was posed, until recently, only in terms of "communications" (i.e. mass media). However with changing technological landscape the "means of communication" mentioned in the Constitution (Article I, para 2 "... the Organization will collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication") no longer apply to mass media alone: it also now includes the stores of information available in libraries, documentation centres and archives, published materials, scientific, technical and socio-economic databases and systems which contribute to the advancement of knowledge and are accessible (or potentially accessible) through electronic technology, computer, networks and telecommunications channels.

Information technologies are also dramatically expanding the possibilities for learning. Not only industrialized countries, but also developing countries are interested in the new technology.

I should like, in particular, to highlight the recent African Regional Symposium on Telematics for Development which was held a few weeks ago in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 3 to 7 April 1995. This symposium was co-organized by UNESCO, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and ITU, in partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). It brought together some 250 participants representing actual and potential users and service providers, telecommunication administrations and operators, concerned government agencies and intergovernmental organizations, including the World Bank and the African Development Bank. The Symposium issued a communiqué, which states that "unless African countries become full actors in the global information revolution, the gap between the haves and the have-nots will widen, opening the possibility of increased marginalization of the continent" and that "Telematics offers African scientists and researchers unparalleled participation in the global scientific community through direct access to Internet, the global network of networks. Developments in the telematics field make it possible for Africans, particularly in rural
areas to have dramatically increased access to communications and information, accelerating and bolstering sustainable development.

The follow-up of this meeting was immediate. In three weeks time an interministerial meeting of Ministers of planning, development and finance of African countries had taken the decision to give high priority to the creation of information highways on the African continent.

I want simply to stress that new usages of information and communication technologies should not be seen, as they often are, as a "luxury" reserved only for industrialized countries. Indonesia is one of the examples of how communication technology can be used for education without which you cannot speak about development and culture.

A new stage of information revolution is at our door, and all countries, whatever their state of development, have to start preparing for it.

Communication, Culture and Development are interlinked. Their interaction will be even more dynamic and deeper with the new possibilities of the communication technologies.

UNESCO will use all its possibilities and instruments so that these new possibilities do not bypass intellectual areas of its fields of interest: education, culture, science and communication. To this end we are looking at all possibilities: superhighways, highways, subways or simply going on foot.

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