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ASIAN COMMUNICATIONS:
THE NEXT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

AMIC 25th Anniversary Conference
1-3 June 1996, Pan Pacific Hotel,
Singapore

"DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION"
Keynote address by Alain MODOUX, Director,
Communication Division, UNESCO
Dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to represent the Director-General of UNESCO in the 25th anniversary conference of the "Asian Mass Communication Research & Information Center" (AMIC). During the last 25 years AMIC has helped us to understand the communication development in this region through very commendable research and reflective activities. On behalf of the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Federico MAYOR, first and foremost I wish to extend the gratitude of our Organization to AMIC for its professional inputs in communication research and for sharing the wisdom of Asian communication experience with the wider world.

Speaking of the next 25 years, AMIC's role becomes even more important because what we are witnessing now in communication field is an unprecedented development which encompasses all aspects of our lives. This would challenge us collectively to elicit concretely the human ideals we stand for.

Many attempts have been taken during last few decades to define development in relation to communication and vice versa. A plethora of research is available on this subject. Derived from these studies number of paradigms and models were introduced to use communication for development. Most of these models were developed from country specific time-bound experiences but considered to be replicable in all parts of the developing world.

Consequently, considerable doubts on this approach have been surfacing in international circles. For instance, the need for a new focus for communication research encompassing social factors and phenomena of communicative interaction, dialogue, movement, social interaction and multi-way communication beyond alliance groups and immediate national proximity was discussed during the IAMCR round table on Communication for Development held in Seoul (July 1994). The participants concluded that "enhanced communication should be seen as a dialogue that makes leadership dynamic instead of exploitative. It should empower the people instead of making them inert peons, thus making it possible to balance social and economic power since power itself is a factor of development, and perhaps a most critical factor."

Considering that development is a long-term process which involves the combination of national and international factors that effectively shift entire societies and regions into new plateau of social change, the adequacy of previous development models to contain development as a time-bound national phenomenon is still questionable in an increasingly globalising environment.

This is all the more so, due to the dramatic acceleration in the development and cross-border use of information and communication technologies during the last few years which has set in motion a world-wide process of transition from the "Industrial society" to the "Information society". The scope of this process seem to have as much, if not greater social, economic and cultural implication for humanity than the outcome of the industrial revolution of the past. On the threshold of a new millennium we are witnessing the opening up of many new opportunities and fundamental changes brought about by the "Communication and Information revolution" which affects all aspects of life-business,
education, training, leisure, life skills and in fact it might even yield a completely new perception on human civilisation of the third millennium.

The current technological developments which are leading to the convergence and integration of the telecommunications, computing and media industries are raising fantastic expectations as to the sharing of knowledge and the fostering of intellectual cooperation. The emerging "multimedia" era should provide the "free flow of ideas by word and image" as stressed in the UNESCO constitution with a boundless application field. In parallel to the technological developments and to the regulatory negotiations which primarily concern the "International Telecommunications Union" (ITU), Unesco, as the intellectual organization of the United Nations system, has an unique chance of becoming, in its various fields of competence, the world forum of reflection where are examined the impact and possibilities of the new communication and information technologies. In other words, UNESCO should stand out as the organization competent for all aspects regarding the "contents" of the new information highways.

The advancements which the new applications in communication and information technologies may yield for improving the sharing of scientific and cultural knowledge, in upholding education and training, especially in the fields of distance education and continuing education, are promising indeed. But there is great risk that only a minority of humanity, among and within the nations, takes full advantage of these advancements. Therefore efforts should be concentrated upon the countries which are in a difficult situation either because of their delayed state of social and economic development, or because of their relative demographic weight. Situated in South and North, East and West, these countries are in danger of being only consumers of the products and services provided thanks to the new applications (transnational television programmes, audiovisual productions, data banks, electronic games, etc.). Their financial and technological capacities and/or their "critical mass" relative to their populations are indeed too small to ensure a national production able to address their respective national needs, or at least part of them. The stakes in terms of cultural and educational values are extremely high, be it the preservation of the cultural diversity, in particular the survival of some minority languages, be it the education in non-violence, in tolerance, in human rights and international understanding, be it the necessary balance to be kept between the education and the entertainment programmes which the multimedia industry will be able to offer soon. One should also bear in mind the sensitive issue related to the protection of the intellectual property rights.

We have to imagine solutions which will allow us to adapt the advancements brought about by the new technologies to the priority needs of the most underprivileged ones and to prevent the current "cultural homogenization" trend in favour of some dominant models from endangering the century-old, even thousand-year-old values of the small and medium size nations.

Thus the traditional explanations and solutions that have been worked out to address the relationship between communication and development in national entities, are actually insufficient to help us understand the complexities of the new situation which, besides an environment of redirecting capital investments of world economy from affluent societies to its peripheries, also involves the trans-national flow of information. In my view, to grasp this, we need a more comprehensive interdisciplinary and inter-regional
approach, and not strait jacketed traditional development models.

Such an approach would require that we reflect on our concerns in a genuine intellectual environment devoid of any vested interests. The point of reference for such reflections should be the universal desirability to improve the conditions for the collective and individual betterment of the human beings whether they live in Asia or elsewhere. This would also mean that as a part of international intellectual co-operation, there is a need to extend discussion to the widest possible extent of civil society.

In order to reflect the some concerns central to this topic, I wish to base my thoughts on the principles of democracy which I think could be the basis for any reassessment for our understanding of what the future development of societies could be. The concept of democracy was evolved only during the last time fraction of the thousands of years old human history. It took so long for the human beings to develop these democratic ideals through the experience of sacrifices, generations of subjugation, genocide and social turmoil. The principles of democracy, indeed, were not entirely new. Some of them were in existence in different ancient societies in many parts of the world. But it took time and many sacrifices to accept them globally as a measure of human development.

We should also not forget the fact that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights agreed upon by all nations in the aftermath of Second World War is the greatest binding principle of this century which provides humanity a universal guideline to guard against "superior mentalities" that undermines collective and individual development of human beings.

However, it is no secret that there have been some concerns and even some degree of reservation on adopting universal Human Rights at national levels. Among them one of the key human rights, namely the Freedom of Expression, was regarded by some as less easy to accept. The justification put forward at times was that many young nations were not yet strong enough to withstand controversies within and should thus curtail the universal right of freedom of expression. This concern was raised during the development communication debates of yester-years and received strong support from the autocratic political systems that ironically fell apart ending the bi-polarised world.

In too many countries, the participation of the people at the grassroots level in the communication process remains in general very low, although it is the prerequisite for any social and economic sustainable development. The struggle against poverty, education for all, the preservation of the environment, the fight against AIDS, the promotion of human rights and of a culture of peace, all these great and noble causes for which the international community is mobilizing its human, intellectual and financial resources, will remain idle words if the people directly concerned in the rural areas and in the suburbs of the megalopolis, do not themselves consider these causes as their own. Therefore they should be given the means and the skills to participate in the communication process, in order to voice their opinions and aspirations through their own media or, at least, through media with which they can identify. There is no development without participation, as there is no participation without communication. Development, participation and communication form part of a continuum.
There are basic values common to all human beings. Cultural expressions may be different, but fundamental human values remain the same to all. They are based on collective relationships of individuals rather than on geographical boundaries the people live in.

The cultural confidence of any given society is determined by the degree of its ability to accommodate a mixture of exchanges and borrowings from others. Success of development therefore depends on culture's openness to other ideas and the willingness as well as the capacity to assimilate the relevant factors of other cultures to enrich itself.

It would be difficult to alienate universal human rights as a culturally unacceptable phenomenon. As Hon. Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim pointed out "If Asia want to speak credibly of Asian values, it should be prepared to champion those ideals which are universal and which belong to humanity as a whole".

In the same way can we consider Asia as a homogeneous region? It even does not have the geographical proximity enjoyed by the countries in Europe. The diversity of religions, ethnicity, languages, ideologies, traditions and even political systems have made it impossible to reduce it to a region representing only one particular set of values. Besides India and China which could be considered as two continental entities, it would not be possible to define a set of geographical values applicable to all cultures across Japan, Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Kazakstan which are far away from each other and have different traditions and cultural roots. Even India has hundreds of different ethnic groups. However, all of the people whether they are in Asia or in other regions of the world have similar human aspirations, that is to live a peaceful productive life and raise children to live in a better society than their parents have been.

One of the key indicators of development in relation to any given community is the level of respect for human rights including of freedom of expression. This could be nurtured through communication systems which provides diversity of information sources, plurality of messages, the accessibility to information and above all the possibility to react to such information, all of which could be possible through new communication and information technologies.

The on-going debate on Asian values though seems a continuation of the old debate of development communication, provides us a forum for a constructive discussion and to refresh our reflections for a universal understanding of the Human rights. For the AMIC, it will be one of the main challenges to establish the Human Rights as an indicator of communication development in Asia and enlighten the wider world of its implications. It is indeed a difficult task to mobilise resources for NGOs that focus on communication research work. But we cannot disregard the fact that investment in this area is a valuable contribution to avoid new type of exclusions that might occur if the policies and strategies on Information Society are determined without examining all different perspectives. Therefore, we should continue to support the activities of AMIC and encourage others to do so.

Together with AMIC let us continue our exploration of the communication development and its relevance to human rights in the next 25 years.