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Development Communication & Communication For Development

By

Anura Goonasekera
MEDIA WORKSHOP ON COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

Organised by

AMIC/WACC/SLFI/SLTTI

DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION & COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

By

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The concepts of Development Communication (Devcom) and communication for development can best be analysed within the framework of social change in Third World societies as a consequence of modernization. Development communication addresses the broader issues of the role of communication in development. It looks at the process of communication within societies in the context of rapid social change. It attempts to provide a conceptual framework for the understanding of the role of communication in the sociological process of development in Third World societies. The approach of Development Communication has changed over the last three decades since its introduction in the early 50ies. There are numerous paradigms of development communication each corresponding to different models of economic development of the Third World societies. These paradigms will be discussed later in this paper.

While development communication refers to an intellectual or academic exercise in order to understand the sociological processes underlying development and modernization of Third World societies, communication for development refers to a practical application and the use of communication to bring about socio-economic development among selected groups of persons. Communication for development therefore refers to communication strategies supportive of specific development projects. It refers to the use of communication to introduce innovations to communities in the belief that such innovation would bring about a higher standard of living and social betterment of the individuals in such communities.

The two concepts of development communication and communication for development are closely related. The theoretical insights of Devcom are applied in communication strategies for development. Conversely,
the practical application of communication for development provides a laboratory to develop the body of knowledge that form the intellectual basis of the concept of development communication.

While Devcom has today become an integral part of development planning in most Third World countries, controversy still surrounds this concept. There is much confusion regarding the status of development and communication projects - which approaches are successful, what direction should the field take, and above all what does the concept really mean. (Lent)

Part of the confusion lies in the multiplicity of paradigms of development communication that have been advanced by scholars during the last three decades. Paradigms are essentially post-hoc superimpositions and constructions usually attempting to produce order from chaos. They are not normally present in the minds of those chiefly associated with them when research is being carried out.

Lerner's work on the Passing of Traditional Society, which was perhaps the most influential of the publications associated with the old paradigm or growth paradigm, is a case in point. The economic growth paradigm with its emphasis on sociological and socio-psychological conditions for take-off was much in vogue during the period 1950-65. In the late sixties the growth paradigm was replaced by the 'Basic human needs and Dependency paradigm with their emphasis on social-structural change both locally and internationally as a sine-qua-non for economic growth. Corresponding to this economic development model was a communication model which emphasised the need for a New World Information and Communication Order. The third paradigm was one of development from tradition which emphasises self reliance. Corresponding to this economic development model was a communication model which emphasised participatory communication. The latest communication paradigm uses the technological innovations in communication and talks of an informatic revolution which could enable the Third World countries to leap frog to the 21st century of advanced technology.

Although there is no dearth of paradigms in the field of development communication they are not of much help in understanding the field or the sociological processes involved in communication. Each paradigm can
be considered as a point of departure at best. Each emphasises a
selected aspect of the process. For instance, Structuralism
emphasises internal social structure while Dependency emphasises
international economic system as a focus of economic development
problems of the Third World.

The early writings on Development Communication are basically an
application of western (ethnocentric) criteria of development to
stagnant economies of the Third World. The 'economic index approach'
of the development economists use simple variables such as the number
of radio sets, telephones, etc., as indicators of progress. Such
indices were unable to capture qualitative changes in the social
structure. Similarly, theories of differentiation which argue that
simple structures in traditional societies become more complex and
more differentiated with modernization ignores the complexity and the
history of many traditional societies which are far from simple. It
attempts to equate modern with the early phase of western capitalism and
its attendant values and industrial work ethic. This analysis is
compounded by theories of exogenously induced change which posit that
inert, static, backward societies are brought to life by exogenously
induced changes through such mechanisms as technical aid, resources,
knowledge and ideas. It ignores the drawing of capital from the
underdeveloped countries by the developed countries. It ignores the power
structures and conflicts within Third World societies from which new values
and consequent changes emerge.

Devcom based on these economic development models are bound to reflect
these weaknesses in their application. For instance, Lerner's take-off
versions of modernity raises serious questions about the manner in which
indicators such as 'education', 'democracy', 'political development'
are used. They are plucked out of their historical and sociological
context and used purely as numerical indicators. Similarly, the 'empathy'
approach using psychic mobility as an index of individual modernity
needs to take a closer look at its methodology, particularly its indices
of psychic mobility. Are we capturing for purposes of quantification, the
psychological characteristics of modernity at all? Again, the exogenous
'change agent' approach of early Rogers writing glosses over many
factors that are central to an understanding of social change. The
concern here is with innovative individualism - which is a value rooted in western liberal cultures.

A general weakness of most Devcom paradigms is that they assume that problems of development of Third World societies are of a technical nature to be resolved by experts. For instance, in Devcom it is assumed that what is lacking for development is 'correct' information. Everyday experience in Third World countries show that the problems of development in these countries are not always of a technical nature to be resolved by experts. They are usually political ones. They involved decisions regarding structural changes within society. An important question therefore is the extent to which a government is willing to make political choices to bring about change and economic development. This is crucial for a meaningful assessment of the role of communication in the development of Third World societies. (Goonasekera)

Any redefinition of the concept of Devcom should take into account not only the existing weakness of the concept, but also the application of the concept to a rapidly changing environment both technological and social. For instance, categorization of technology as high/small/big are no longer relevant in the context of their increasing interactive nature and the consequent blurring of conventional distinctions. In a rapidly interactive and changing technological environment, concepts such as 'appropriate technology' have lost whatever meaning they may have had originally.

So is it with concepts such as cultural imperialism or cultural invasion. Quite apart from the fact that the import of foreign material to Third World societies, which is central to this concept, take place with the active support of the Third World media managers and policy makers, development of satellite technology makes it quite likely that very soon foreign programmes would be beamed directly to the individual homes of Third World countries by whomever owns a satellite for this purpose. This can be done with or without the consent of the rulers of such countries. There is very little that Third World countries can do to stop their citizens receiving and watching such programmes if the citizens wish to do so.
The concern for cultural identity of Third World countries, their 'protection' from foreign influences therefore should take a different view. Banning foreign influences or keeping a culture 'pure' by preventing it from having contact with foreign cultures is now almost impossible. Third World countries will therefore have to emphasise the importance of the institutions within the country, such as the family, kinship links, schools, temples, neighbourhoods, occupational groups, etc., for preserving indigenous cultural values. In plural societies such an emphasis should be done bearing in mind that the culture in such societies are themselves varied and sometimes contribute to internal conflict. It has been observed that the concern for the preservation of cultural identity against 'invasion' by western values has sometimes resulted in an emphasis of the cultural values of a dominant community in these plural societies. The minority cultures within such societies did not receive the same emphasis, partly because of the lack of financial and other resources and partly because of ignorance. The latent effect of such a policy however, was to divide the communities further.

The minority communities perceived the emphasis given through the mass media to the cultural values of the dominant community as an imposition of alien values of the dominant community on them. It was in a way, a domestic form of cultural imperialism. The mass media under such a policy of cultural identity, instead of unifying the plural societies of the Third World, tended to divide them further. (Goonasekera) In such a context, the answer may be to de-massify the mass media by having smaller newspapers, TV and radio stations that can cater to specific cultural and interest groups. This envisages a degree of freedom that is not currently found in many Third World countries. But this is the only meaningful role of Devcom in the future. Devcom policies should be aimed at providing wider participation of people in the process of communication rather than attempt to emphasise, through a centralized media, the cultural identity and values of a dominant group in society in the mistaken belief of preserving indigenous cultures.
Experience has also shown that development communication, when used without concomitant changes in the structure of society, could lead to the strengthening of the status quo or worse, the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor in developing countries. For instance, when new agricultural practices such as cash crops under irrigation were introduced to Third World villages, the first to adopt such practices were the more affluent and educated persons in the village. This is because such practices initially require the taking of risks and modest financial investments which are not within the reach of the poor. The result is that the new practices give an opportunity for the rich persons in the village to become richer, thereby widening and strengthening the existing social disparities. Scarlett Epstein, an Anthropologist reports that when irrigation was first introduced to the village of Wangala in South India, it raised the whole economy of the village to a higher level in one stroke. But the village remained wholly agricultural. It was unilinear development. The employment structure and traditional role relations remained unchanged because the labour requirements for cash cropping could be easily met under the traditional system. "The unilinear economic development in Wangala set up no incompatability between the new wants and the old ways in the indigenous employment structure ..... The theoretical point is of interest .... Economic development may occur without any change in economic roles and relations, provided it does not result in re-allocation of resources or an increased range of economic relations." (Scarlett Epstein 1962, p.316)

The new paradigm of Devcom should start on the premise that there is no universal path to development - western or Third World. Development is a dialectic process, closely tied up with the history, culture and the genius of the people in the developing societies. The developed countries of the West are not the mirror images of the future of Third World countries, just as much as the Third World countries are not the mirror images of the past conditions of developed countries. Development is a multi-dimensional concept. It embraces moral as well as material development and at present, no part of the world is known to be developed in all these respects.
There are few salient principles that the new paradigm should take into account. These are the principles of basic human needs, basic human rights, self reliance, growth, redistribution, structural changes and equity among nations. There is therefore not one role but many roles for Devcom depending on the historical, cultural and developmental conditions of the specific countries. Devcom therefore should take an eclectic view of the problems of development if it is to address the varied issues connected with the problems of social change concomitant to development of Third World societies.
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