

Communication for Development

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Second Communication Forum
in Commemoration of World Communication Year
Tokyo, Japan
14 November 1985

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to present some brief remarks at the opening of this Second Communication Forum in commemoration of World Communication Year.

The theme of this Forum, Communication for Development, is a vast subject with unexpected and profound implications for our views on the evolution of society and the individual's place in it. Communication is a constant in the lives of all of us, but the variations in its quality and accessibility is one of the key factors that distinguishes the privileged among us - whether in the North or South, East or West - from those who lack amenities and a basic sense of control over their lives.

The theme, Communication for Development, is particularly apt at this time, when we are called upon to rethink our notions of both communications and development - and particularly the relationship between them.

Development is in crisis, in theory and in practice, in developing and industrialized countries. The development of the industrialized countries is in a stage which to many observers recalls the crisis of the 18th and 19th century transformation from agrarian to industrial society. In that period, the basis of the livelihood of the majority changed radically. The wrenching social adjustments that accompanied the Industrial Revolution caused a depth of human misery that the global community is determined to avoid repeating. Yet we do find ourselves on the brink - or some would say well over the threshold - of a second industrial revolution, based on communications technology, which has equally profound consequences for the way human livelihood and endeavor is organized. How can we avoid the dreadful inequalities, misery and exploitation that characterized the early phases of the first industrial revolution?

Economic disparities between and within countries are closely related to disparities in communications infrastructure as well as access to relevant and timely information. Sometimes this information can make the difference between survival and disaster for the millions who live on or below the line of

subsistence: information about market conditions for agricultural commodities, about simple treatments for common illnesses such as diarrhea, or news of an approaching storm.

We must keep in mind, however, that new communications technologies and methods can be used in development in two very different ways. Sophisticated communications techniques can be used for the concentration of power and the centralization of control or for the opposite, that is for enhanced participation and for devolution of power. Communication is the glue that permits decentralization without fragmentation.

In order to perform this cohesive function, however, communication must be a two-way process. Communications infrastructure must be designed not only for the provision of information from above but also for the articulation and expression of interests, needs and opinions from below. Only in this way can the leaders of a society keep in touch with what is really going on among the people whom they purport to lead; only in this way can ordinary people develop both their knowledge and their confidence.

I would ask your indulgence for a moment to mention one project at the United Nations University that is attempting to combine the information function and the two-way communications function of new technologies. We call the project the Village Video Network. In this project, ordinary people - small-scale farmers, slum dwellers, street vendors - have been taught to use lightweight, easily maintained video equipment and have made films about their own experiences. The process of mastering the equipment and actually producing their own films was in itself an empowering experience for many, giving them, literally, a new voice and a new confidence in their own abilities and perceptions. Some of the films made by villagers have been used to share the lessons of experience with other villagers. For example, the experience of a Chinese village in building and operating an integrated rural energy system based on biogas is now being shown, at government request, in Guyana, where there is keen interest in such systems. The films made by ordinary people are also being used to educate leaders: to give community leaders in Ahmedabad, India an authentic glimpse of the problems faced by poor women in the city slums, for example.

I use this as one example of the many-faceted potential of what is called the Communications Revolution. Successful development is very closely bound up with a society's capacity to learn. The capacity to learn can, of course, be multiplied by the ability to absorb and use appropriately a wide range of the new communications technologies.

The tools and techniques of the Communications Age are essential ingredients of development seen as a learning process. However, development is not just a matter of acquiring technology and extending communications networks. These tools, to be effective assets for development, have to be employed creatively within the intellectual and cultural frameworks that have meaning for the audiences they are trying to reach. It goes without saying that the messages carried must also be accessible to the appropriate audiences. This may be an obvious point but it is a controversial one; monopoly of the

channels of communication is one of the sturdiest handles of the elite's grip on power.

What development is really about is the release of the energies of the people who form the base of society. They are society's real decision-makers. The decisions of the small farmer about which crops to plant, where and when; the decision of the poor villager to cut one more tree for wood fuel; the decision of the pastoralist to graze her goats on an already eroded hillside; the decision of the fisherman to keep even the too-small fish to feed his family; the decision of the urban vegetable seller to have one more child to help her with her work load - these are some of the truly momentous decisions of our time, and will determine the course of development as well as the future health of our planet. Yet these small, individual decision-makers are the people who are in danger of being left out of the Communications Revolution - left to make their momentous decisions without scientific knowledge, without information about external conditions that may affect them directly, without channels for expressing the problems they encounter or the ingenious solutions they invent. I believe the challenge to a forum such as this one is to think of ways to ensure that these people, who are the living link between communication and development, are not overlooked.

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