

## COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES\*

RAGNAR FRISCH†

University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

(Received 22 March 1971)

PROBLEMS of information and communication become more and more important in nearly every phase of modern life. Not only the *technical aspects* of these questions come into the foreground such as radio, television, communication through satellites, data processing and electronic computers and the various forms of newspaper organization etc., but even more important is the *deeper meaning* of human contacts among individuals, among social classes and among nations.

We are becoming more and more occupied by the question of how we can make information flows pass not only from a number of subordinate cells up to a decision making centre and back in the form of orders, we become more and more occupied by finding out how interflows in a multistructural network pass in several directions in a truly democratic form of cooperative decisions. The question of democracy in enterprises is one aspect of this endeavour. The relations between rich and poor countries is another. And no less important is the question of cooperation inside a given developing country.

When these general considerations are to be applied to the question of the materially underdeveloped countries, we must remember that the ultimate purpose of progress is something far beyond an increase in material living standards. It is cultural, spiritual and moral and it is a training in the philosophy of helping others.

This basic wisdom is a heritage from the great Oriental and Middle East thinkers and sages of old. It has been passed down to us through the centuries and millennia in many different forms, but always with emphasis on the superiority of contemplation, serenity, goodness and duty as compared to the material desires. To quote but one example we find it typically expounded in the Indian Bhagavad-Gita, which is part of the immense epos Mahabharata.

Bhagavad-Gita recites a metaphysical talk between the young prince Ardjouna and God before a big battle, God being disguised as one of Ardjouna's companions.

Here we learn that whenever action is needed and unavoidable, it should not be motivated by a desire for pleasure, material advantages and domination over others, but should spring from goodness and a feeling of duty. One should cherish a feeling of love for everybody, friends and enemies alike. An emanation of this virtuous attitude we find in the famous saying of Mahatma Gandhi: "Infinite resistance to the wrong doing and infinite love for the wrong doer."

---

\* Presented at the World Conference on Social Communication for Development Organizations, March 15-20, 1970 in Mexico City.

† 1969 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences.

Such thoughts were not confined to cultivation in the exclusive circle of a few intellectuals. They penetrated deep into the thinking of the millions and influenced their behaviour and outlook in a most profound way. The so-called developing countries are in reality much more developed than many of the rich countries, so far as this finer meaning of development concerns.

In many of the rich countries the eternal wisdom has become almost completely forgotten. It has become forgotten to a point where a faint gleam of the old wisdom, when it occurs, will appear to be a sensational "discovery" of something new. Much has for instance been written lately about the "discovery" that it is necessary to find a new guiding principle, a new *purpose*, in the economies of the extremely commercialized and developed countries. It has become more and more obvious that the increase in productive capacity in these countries no longer tends to serve the real and worthy *needs* of the population. To find an increasing outlet for such consumer goods as can be sold at a profit in a free market economy, it has become necessary to invent new needs that can be forced upon the public through high pressure salesmanship, inducements to buy on credit and a reckless exploitation of people's fear of appearing not to be able to afford what the "others" can.

Slum-clearing, improvement of general sanitation and health services, general education, a general dissipation of cultural values, improvements in old age pensions, social security in general and the hundred other worthy things that can only be realized through Government initiative, represent wants that certainly do not need to be invented. They are there, but their satisfaction has lagged behind and only very slowly has it followed the general economic progress. The reason for this is simply that it does not in a commercial sense pay to satisfy these wants. There is no profit motive behind them. It pays better dividends to use the productive resources of the nation for the creation of and the satisfaction of more and more crazy *commercializable* wants.

In this way the materially highly developed nations have been led more and more towards the extreme opposite of the ancient Oriental and Middle East wisdom. Life in the most highly developed countries has become more and more hectic, more and more concentrated on how to get hold of the newest gadgets for pleasure and high pitch entertainment—and on how to find means of *paying the oldest bills* due.

It is no coincidence that this development towards inner restlessness and tension has taken place simultaneously with a cult of the noisy, the ugly and the insane in all forms of art. And also simultaneously with a frightening increase in juvenile and adult criminality and a wave of psychiatric ills.

Is this necessarily the price we have to pay for economic development? Do the materially underdeveloped countries have to go through this same cycle only to *rediscover* in the end the millennial truth which the ancient Oriental and Middle East thinkers and sages tried to teach us?

It would be defeatism to think that this is necessary. We *must* find a way to abolish poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and ill health without losing the priceless heritage of old culture and old wisdom.

This *is* possible, but it takes a determinate policy to achieve it, the economic development must be *guided*.

Material development is necessary indeed. Nobody with a beating heart can fail to be moved by the present state of affairs in materially underdeveloped countries. But it must always be remembered that economic development is only a means towards a higher goal.

This leads us to the practical question of what actually can be done in the world of today to help the developing countries towards rapid development in the economic field. Here we will on several points become engaged in questions of communication in the deeper meaning of this word.

In the field of developing countries and aid to developing countries certain fundamental principles emerge.

A *first principle* is that when we speak of help and make statistics of help we should always mean *actual net help* without any strings attached. We should not include in our talking and in our statistic anything of the various forms of disguised continuation of the old colonial exploitation. Unfortunately much of the so-called help or aid today is too much determined by the selfishness of the rich countries, as is for instance the case when a big firm in a rich country with a view to increasing its own profit, makes an investment in a developing country. From a national viewpoint we may for instance ask: will Norway be willing to give up some of its advantages in shipping in order to push national shipping in the developing countries? Will Great Britain and Soviet be willing to sacrifice their raw material interests in Biafra in a spirit of real help to this part of Africa? Thousands of questions of this sort might be asked. Real help would for instance be appropriation over the state budget in a well-to-do country towards specific health, educational, agricultural and industrial purposes in a developing country or in a group of developing countries.

A *second principle* is that the help must be given with full understanding of the cultural, historical and geographical situation in the developing country in question. There should be no question of attempting to copy in the developing country those institutions or types of organization or monetary rules that are prevalent in the rich countries of the west.

A *third principle* is that nothing must be done which is against the wishes of the authorities of the developing country. If something contrary to the wishes of these authorities is attempted, we get a situation of foreign intervention, and this by all means must be avoided.

This raises in many cases very difficult questions of communication between the developing country and the aid-giving country.

Recently I read a report from a Norwegian development worker who complained that too much of the help was directed into central conspicuous projects to which the central authorities could point with pride, and too little into immediate human support in the villages. This of course is a deep question of priorities which may well be considered differently by the central authority in the developing country and the authorities of the aid-giving country. At the same time the Norwegian development worker expressed a rather bitter opinion that the individual workers were put on specialized jobs as teacher, medical assistant, industrial specialist etc. and had to work in an isolated atmosphere without understanding much of the global aspects of the development work.

He also said that a particular cause for dissatisfaction among those who take part in the development work was a nearly complete lack of project evaluation, both before, during, and after the execution of the projects.

This particular kind of criticism I can well understand. My own work in developing countries has just centred around this crucial question: project evaluation. I feel very strongly that here is a point where theoretical contributions under full recognition of the peculiarities of the developing country is very much needed. A rational and coherent treatment of investment criteria can in my view only be given by considering all the investment projects—defined through the project descriptions—as integrated parts of a complete

macro-economic decision model with all its structural and (politically) preferential aspects. The project descriptions are building stones in the complete decision model. They represent *possibilities* but nothing more.

The great variety of so-called "investment criteria" that are frequently discussed as criteria that should be applicable to any given project *per se* just as the project is defined through its project description can, therefore, in my opinion never lead to a really satisfactory solution of the investment decision problem. The *per se* approach to investment criteria is only escapism. It may be tempting because of its simplicity, but it has no decisional foundation.

On these various questions there is considerable room for differences of opinion between the authorities of the developing country and the authorities of the aid-giving country. What can be done in a tactful way in order to smooth out these differences and at the same time lead in a direction which can increase the effectivity of the aid? It is not an easy matter to point out in detail how this can be achieved in each particular case without breaking what I call the third principle of not letting the aid take the shape of foreign intervention in the matters of the developing country.

In this short presentation it is of course impossible to map out a complete scheme for how this can be done in the various cases. Only a few suggestions might be made. For instance: a tactful form of persuasion trying to make the developing countries' authorities understand the need for an advanced form of project evaluation. Perhaps something might be done in a tactful way by such means as to distinguish formally between centralized aid and local aid. All these questions come very definitely under the heading of information and communication in the development work.

In a broader context these problems of communication concern *the human factor* in developing countries. In all my work in developing countries, I very strongly came under the impression that the human factor in developing countries is an enormous problem which on several scores put a serious brake on effective development work. I must give you some examples of what I mean. A general human characteristic which one often finds in developing countries is *jealousy and personal animosities*. It may manifest itself among local leaders at the high level and also among politicians and administrators on lower levels and among all who have the job of performing small and medium tasks in society. Sometimes the situation is such that if one wants to understand what really happens in a certain case, one first has to find out what the personal constellations are.

Sometimes the situation is so extreme that it is next to impossible to solve it because the very fact that one of the leaders in the developing country has taken a positive attitude towards a certain proposal, is in itself sufficient to make one or more of the other leaders go against it. The spirit of cooperation is lacking, sometimes even to the point of keeping data for oneself without letting others get hold of them. This of course is a means of strengthening one's own position. This undoubtedly is a serious problem of communication in a developing country, although most of the time the main difficulty here is not essentially connected with the technical question of how mass-media work. Sometimes it happens that what looks as differences of principle between parties and districts—perhaps even to the point of civil war—is in fact construed and maintained by rival leaders who only want to support their personal position.

Another problem in a developing country is the existence of *corruption*. In its mildest form this is not very much more than a customary—half way legalized use of "fees"—of the sort that was legally used to some extent in developed countries in old times to com-

pensate for the use of the state machinery. In its mildest form this causes no great problem in developing countries. But the system becomes dangerous when higher people in the administration aim at making big fortunes for themselves by mixing public finances and their own finances. In developing countries such a system may partially be a heritage from the colonial time when the foreign rulers found it effective for their own purposes to attach local leaders to the foreign rulers by offering the local leaders big economic advantages. Subsequently many local leaders in the developing countries have succeeded in learning this art all by themselves. In this respect they do not lag behind some big financial and industrial leaders in economically developed countries.

A third human factor which one sometimes finds in developing countries mostly on a medium and low level—is a *lack of initiative*. Sometimes this manifests itself to a point which makes it next to impossible to achieve even small practical amendments. An example in point is India in general vs. the active state Punjab. I have seen and heard about a number of cases of this sort.

In the fourth place we often find *a lack of precision and a lack of responsibility* towards a given task, small or big. There can be no doubt about the fact that precision and a feeling of responsibility for a given task are among the many decisive factors that explain the material advance in certain now highly or partially developed countries. Germany, Israel and Japan are examples in point.

In the fifth place we have the question of *stamina and persistency*. It is, of course, easier to report back to one's superior that the task could not be solved. Or perhaps simply neglect to report.

Very concrete examples in this area are cases which I have often found among younger economists and statisticians in the developing countries : during a conference to plan an investigation I have often found great interest, even to the point of enthusiasm. As long as the meeting lasts everybody is eager for explanations and eager to be assigned a task. But the moment the meeting is closed, it is often as if all the enthusiasm and willingness to work evaporates in the air. Subsequently the leader of the investigation has to remind the people again and again and press on in order to have the work completed. On one occasion a very intelligent mathematically trained associate had accepted a task to be completed in 10 days. Since nothing happened I investigated and found out that the man was not even present. Only after a long time did he show up and explained with a smile that an uncle of his had come to town and this had caused considerable social obligations. It did not occur to him that in such a case he ought at least to have informed me. In many cases I have had a desperate feeling of the amount of supervision work needed to assure that the work was well performed and the figures in big tables as exact as it was possible to get them. As a sixth and final point we may think of the *soft state* in developing countries. Gunnar Myrdal accentuates this in his *Asian Drama*. By this term Myrdal indicates a general lack of social discipline in developing countries. A deficiency in law observance and enforcement, lack of obedience to rules and directives, a tendency to resist public controls and their implementation.

All these aspects connected with the human factor in the developing countries are extremely difficult to handle and demand great care and tact, and tax the patience and understanding and time of the development worker which has been called in order to help. His technical know-how is really only a small part of what is really required from him.

But *this must not stop him*, if he really wants to give service to other humans who are very badly in need of it.