A Critical Look at the 'New Paradigm' of Communication and Development

By the mid-1970s, it seemed safe to conclude that the dominant paradigm (of development) had "passed", at least as the main model for development in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Rogers, 1976: 223).

Naturally, self-development implies a completely different role for communication than in the usual top-down development approach of the past (Rogers, 1976: 231).

These two quotations from Prof. Everett M. Rogers' latest exposition in Communication Research indicate the new thinking of some scholars who have paid attention to the question of development and the role of communication in the process of development. The new approach has gained particular attention since the publication of Schramm and Lerner's (1976)

Communication and Change in the Developing Countries: Ten Years After.

BACKGROUND

New waves of thinking leading to the questioning of the old paradigm have been reaching ashore particularly since the beginning of this decade. The 'miracle of modernization' in China wrought within two decades based on an indigenous system stirred up a good deal of academic thinking (Rogers, 1976: 221; Chu, 1974). Population, pollution and related problems directed our attention to the limits of growth as demonstrated by Meadows et. al. (1972). The relevance of Buddhist economics and 'intermediate technology' was expounded by economist Schumacher (1973). Radical economist Frank (1971) blamed underdevelopment squarely on capitalism. And the emergence of OPEC demonstrated that development need not necessarily start from an industrial base.

Meantime a tremendous interest in development communication was taking place in developing countries. In Asia, interested scholars began questioning the intellectual ethnocentrism involved in the definition of development in the dominant paradigm evolved by Western scholars. In 1973 a conference was held in Bangalore devoted entirely to discuss the question of communication and change in rural Asia. Filipino scholar Jamias (1975) pointed out that the end goal of development communication should be the attainment of a higher quality of life which takes into account not only economic but also social, political, cultural and moral values. He emphasized social equality as a measure of development in contrast to the gross national product or per capita income. Greater social equality as well as "the larger fulfillment of the human potential" were underlined by Quebral (1972) in defining development. She deemed the "Western norms..."
of a free press“ irrelevant in the practice of development communication (Quebral, 1974). Inayatullah (1975) questioned the adequacy of the Western development model because it emphasized "factors internal to Asian societies as causes of underdevelopment to the exclusion of external factors". The dominant paradigm did not take into account the impact of terms of trade, economic imperialism and related external factors.

A Swedish researcher with extensive communication experience in Africa also appeared to question the dominant paradigm when he stated that "no group should have the exclusive right to propound its own value system or to suppress the value systems of other groups". He pointed out that "the essence of development work" should be to create new opportunities rather than "to try to change people". The extension-talk approach, he said, was "completely useless" (Fuglesang, 1973: 17, 29, 32). Making particular reference to the use of mass media-in development, the Poffenbegers (1971: 42) made the point that "if we can understand the goals villagers try to attain and how these goals may be changing as a result of the changes that are taking place in their environment, it may be possible to design mass media programs which have meaning for them, and which as a result are more likely to influence attitude change". The need to recognize local norms had earlier been pointed by Stephenson (1968: 268) who defined modernization as "the movement of persons or groups along a cultural dimension from what is defined by the culture norms as traditional toward what is defined by the same culture as modern".

The purpose of this paper is to look at the main elements of the dominant paradigm of development; to critically examine the alternative pathways to development; and to examine whether there is a new role for communication in paving the pathways toward development.

THE DOMINANT PARADIGM

According to Rogers (1976) the main elements of the dominant paradigm were the emphasis on economic growth, capital-intensive technology and centralised planning; and the attribution of underdevelopment mainly to internal causes.

The heavy influence of economists and bankers is reflected in this paradigm. It is criticised by Rogers for the following reasons:

(i) It assumes a rational economic man. The profit motive is assumed to bring about behavioural changes.

(ii) It measures development in terms of the gross national product or per capita income. It ignores the equality of distribution of development benefits.

(iii) It assumes infinite growth and ignores the limits imposed by population growth, pollution, etc. Thus it does not take into account the "quality of life".

(iv) It assumes the need for central economic planning thereby showing an "aggregate bias". It does not take into account the possibilities of autonomous development as exemplified by China and emulated by Cambodia.

(v) It emphasizes technology and capital rather than labour thereby bringing about economic dependence on advanced countries. Low priority is given to agricultural development.