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# Development Communication: 1. History and Theories

Pedro F. Hernández-Ramos  
*Santa Clara University*, [phernandezramos@scu.edu](mailto:phernandezramos@scu.edu)

Wilbur Schramm

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## DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

This entry includes three articles, each dealing with a different aspect of the subject:

1. History and Theories
2. Alternative Systems
3. Projects

The first and third cover predominantly the Western (especially the U.S.) approach; the second raises some criticisms directed at both the theoretical and the practical limitations of the Western perspective and presents alternative views.

### 1. HISTORY AND THEORIES

A common way to discuss development is as purposive changes undertaken in a society to achieve what may be regarded generally as a different (“improved”) state of social and economic affairs. The concept has been used to describe Western (particularly European) economic growth since the MIDDLE AGES, as well as to explain the process through which all societies are expected to achieve certain economic, political, social, cultural, and other goals. Thus the notion of development is often seen as a derivation of the much older idea of progress, which has roots going back to ancient Greece.

*Change* in human society is widely considered inevitable. Whether it is (or should be) slow and gradual (evolutionary) or fast and radical (revolutionary) is a matter of dispute. Throughout much of its history humanity did not seem to be overly concerned with the direction of progress, for the most part assuming that all change—and therefore progress—was good. In the Western world the Industrial Revolution, along with major political events that introduced important changes in social organization and life-style (e.g., the French and American revolutions), supported the view that secular development and not just progress (as guaranteed by religious ideas on the perfectibility of humankind) was not only possible but desirable and achievable as well.

The emergence of Europe since the fifteenth century as the major force in the EXPLORATION and COLONIZATION of the globe established patterns of economic relations among nations, or between nations and their colonies, that have had an enduring impact. Economic “development” was seen as emanating from the benefits of trade and the possession

of colonies that provided abundant raw materials, cheap labor, and outlets for the manufacturing industries of the metropolis. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries European powers attached great importance to the possession of colonies and the advantages derived from them. Nations without such colonies felt they were at a disadvantage (e.g., by not being able to trade in their own currency) and defined themselves as the “have-nots” in opposition to the “have” countries with colonies. It would not be until well into the twentieth century that Europe would come to realize that the true “have-nots” were the colonies themselves.

### The Twentieth Century

If the United States emerged from World War I as the preeminent economic power, the outcome of World War II established the United States as the foremost political power as well. The reconstruction of Europe and the establishment of a functioning world economy became the principal objectives of U.S. foreign policy. At a political level the increasing differences with the Soviet Union, its wartime ally, and the perceived threat to U.S. national security from Soviet intentions toward Europe and the rest of the world led U.S. President Harry S. Truman to redefine his country’s foreign policy from an isolationist stance to one of active leadership. Rather than “sit back and do nothing” or respond militarily to the postwar situation, the United States decided on a program of financial and economic assistance to Europe. And rather than implement this program through heavy-handed intervention in the affairs of the recipient countries or channel aid through newly created multilateral organizations—mainly the United Nations and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development—the United States offered the Marshall Plan, which extended financial and economic assistance in a multilateral framework of consultation and cooperation between donor and recipient countries. See INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS.

The Marshall Plan was successful both in rebuilding the economies of the participating European countries and in achieving its major political goal: the “containment” of the spread of communism. This goal was first advanced with the declaration of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947 and was reaffirmed in the Point Four Program of 1949, in which Truman offered the world “the benefits of our [U.S.] scientific advance and industrial progress . . . for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.”

Whether one chooses to interpret U.S. actions as derived from humanitarian concerns, economic self-interest, or larger political considerations (i.e., confrontation with the Soviets), the offer of technical assistance and economic and financial aid was un-

precedented and raised a series of formidable problems, not the least of which was how to approach the whole enterprise. Because of its very limited experience in (government-sponsored) foreign aid and development administration the U.S. government turned to the academic establishment for help. Contemporary historians and social scientists tried to distill the lessons of Western “development” into a model appropriate to different states and regions. Around the late 1950s the model that began to emerge might be summarized as follows:

- Industry is the prime mover of the economy. Therefore, a major part of investment must go into industry and what is necessary to fuel it, including raw materials, transportation, and training.
- Modern society requires more specialists rather than generalists, with each sector (e.g., industry, health) expected to have its own special skills and responsibilities.
- Public EDUCATION is needed to raise the abilities of the entire work force and of the proportion able to participate in government. Health care and family planning are needed to increase the well-being of the population and curtail demand for jobs, housing, and the like.
- In situations in which rapid development is desired, necessary information can be diffused and PERSUASION can occur through the mass media with the aid of an extension service (*see* DIFFUSION; INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION). Adoption of promising innovations should be encouraged, along with increases in productivity.
- The profits from centrally owned and managed industry, trade, and sale of manufactured goods would be expected to “trickle down” from the center of the system to the periphery, from the industries and central markets to the farms, from the cities to the villages.

This outline represents the core ideas of “development planning.” More specific theories focusing on economic, political, psychological, sociological, and other factors were also advanced.

**Economic theories.** During the 1950s economic analysts rejected wealth distribution from rich to poor countries as the source of economic progress in favor of the notion of *growth*. Walt Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) was very influential through the early 1960s. His approach described development as consisting of five successive stages: (1) traditional society, (2) preconditions for “takeoff,” (3) “takeoff,” (4) “drive toward maturity,” and (5) self-sustained growth, in which it is possible for the country to move on without further help from the outside. Rostow claimed to have derived his scheme from the experience of the West, and he provided guidelines about the time periods

involved in each stage as well as several specific economic measures associated with each (e.g., Gross National Product per capita, rate of savings and investment). Rostow’s scheme provided for the classification of countries according to the stage of development they were judged to be in, thus allowing certain decisions concerning the type and amount of aid to be made on a more “rational” basis.

Rostow’s and other stage theories faced substantial criticisms almost from the start. The traditional/modern dichotomy was challenged on the grounds that “traditional” was only defined negatively as what is not “modern,” the latter taken to be self-evident. Whether the West had actually “developed” by passing through the five stages was also questioned: when had the West (particularly western Europe) been a “traditional” society? The mechanisms or factors moving societies from one stage to the next were not explicit, and the assumption that *all* countries were going to develop as the Western ones had or not develop at all raised many eyebrows. Yet many of these problems were overlooked by people who found the imagery of the theory compelling.

Other economic theories of development were less ambitious and concentrated on purely economic factors, usually to their detriment. Frederick Frey, in a comprehensive review published in 1973, argued that economic theories had paid little or no attention to communication factors even though several were clearly implicit in their assumptions and formulations for action. By emphasizing organization and economies of scale, for example, these theories ignored relevant social, political, cultural, and other non-economic factors that influence development. However flawed, Rostow’s theory included a recognition of those noneconomic elements that can promote or derail efforts at social change. Development was acknowledged to mean more than just economic growth, opening the field to other social sciences.

**Psychological theories.** Although economists commonly interpreted development to mean broad changes in the social and economic structure of a country, psychologists approached the problem at the level of the individual, taking development to be a problem of “modernization” of the people and not just of abstract macrosocial or macroeconomic structures. The work of two U.S. scholars was very influential in the early 1960s: David C. McClelland’s *The Achieving Society* (1961) and Everett E. Hagen’s *On the Theory of Social Change* (1962). Both emphasized individual characteristics as determinants of social structure and change. Hagen argued that social structure is a function of personality, and he paired traditional society with a “traditional personality” and modern society with a creative, innovative personality. The predominant features of the traditional personality were defined as low self-esteem, author-

itarianism, resistance to innovation, and little or no inclination to perceive the world as subject to human manipulation—characteristics opposite to those of the modern personality. Hagen argued that only fundamental changes in the home environment, tied to wider social changes such as increased urbanization, LITERACY, and modern communication media, are capable of producing enduring changes in the personality of individuals.

McClelland's view elaborated MAX WEBER's treatment of the Protestant ethic. His argument was that Protestantism promotes the need for achievement among its followers, which in turn encourages individual entrepreneurship and socioeconomic development. He described the "need for achievement" as fostering an individual's desire to meet demanding challenges, to surmount tests, and to succeed in the face of difficulties. A society full of such persons is likely to be an achieving—and consequently a "developing"—society.

For both authors contact with the West and the creation and evolution of Western-style social institutions were crucial features of the development process. Although both theories claimed to be supported by empirical evidence, from historical analyses as well as from contemporary survey studies, their conceptual soundness (because of their reliance on the traditional/modern view of societies) and their applicability and usefulness were questioned. Few could deny the importance for development of individual-level changes, but experience was showing that in many cases social structures were much more difficult to change than at first had been imagined, and even willing and able individuals or groups could often make little or no significant changes in their social environment.

**Political theories.** Political scientists took a different approach, emphasizing the importance of the country's political system as a determinant of the social and economic domains. Because many of the "underdeveloped" countries were, in fact, new nations that had attained their independence after World War II, analysts in the West hypothesized that a major, immediate need was the integration of those countries as viable political and economic entities. Some of these countries could draw on offers of assistance from their former colonial rulers, but others could not or did not want to do so. Whereas many of the new countries were more or less homogeneous with respect to ancestry, LANGUAGE, RELIGION, and so on, many others faced formidable problems trying to integrate into a unified country peoples from different ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. "Nation-building" was defined as a problem amenable to study by Western scholars, including noted political scientist Karl Deutsch. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s a

common assumption (often based on correlational studies) was that economic and political development were closely related, and this led to suggestions that the "developing" countries should try to establish Western-style political institutions and practices (mainly, a democratic form of government and a free-market economic system). Thus the need to promote national identity was tied to ways of adding legitimacy to existing political institutions and power structures in charge of creating a broad consensus behind a nation's development goals.

Even though political theories of development paid substantial attention to communication issues, they were still mainly political, that is, mostly concerned with the ways in which communication processes and the mass media in particular could affect a nation's process of political development (e.g., instill democratic values in a population or act as tools for social mobilization).

**Communication theories of development.** Another group of social scientists addressed development from a different perspective. Rather than considering communication as one factor affecting a central process deemed to be social, psychological, political, or of any other nature, they took communication to be at the center of the development process, incorporating all other aspects in one form or another.

Sociologists, anthropologists, communication researchers, and other specialists working from this perspective in the early 1960s also assumed the problem to be one of transforming "traditional" societies and peoples into "modern" ones. Those taking an anthropological view looked at the problem as one of *individual modernization*, a consequence of cultural and social factors and the specific characteristics of the innovations being promoted. Power relations between "donor" and "recipient" cultures, the content of the "message" implicit in the innovations, and the resistance to change at both the cultural and the individual level were analyzed. The common stages of the innovation-adoption process were identified, but it would be up to sociologists to provide a more complete picture.

The details that sociologists filled in identified adopter and nonadopter groups, the patterns of social communication within each (see NETWORK ANALYSIS), and elaboration of the "stages" of the adoption process to include the following five: awareness, interest, evaluation of the innovation, trial, and acceptance (or rejection). Groups studied included farmers (e.g., adoption of new attitudes, seed types, or farming practices), women of child-bearing age (e.g., adoption of family planning), and doctors (e.g., adoption of new drugs). Many valuable lessons on the ways in which social groups assimilate (or reject) innovations were learned, but the theoretical and practical limitations of the approach also

became evident, among them a tendency to rely on survey methods even when they were inadequate for the cultural and historical context or for the specific problem under study.

At a more general level, one of the most influential theories that assigned a very important role to communication was proposed by U.S. scholar Daniel Lerner. In *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958) Lerner identified four critical variables that he said summarized the development process: *urbanization*, leading to increased *literacy*, which in turn affects *mass media exposure*, resulting in greater economic and political *participation* in society. This simple, linear scheme was initially modified by Lerner himself to allow for reciprocal influences between literacy and mass media exposure. Several other researchers tested many other models, using the same four variables on different data sets and later including other variables to create more complex models. At the individual level, Lerner's most important hypothesis has to do with the nature of the "modern individual," characterized by an ability to accommodate to change plus a high degree of empathy—the ability to imagine oneself in the role or with the responsibilities of someone else. Lerner argued that the primary step toward individual modernization was the acquisition of this capacity for empathy as well as the willingness to hold opinions on a wide variety of issues and questions not usually familiar to "traditional" peoples (who may not even have knowledge of those issues owing to lack of access to mass media sources of information). Frey synthesized into two variables, which he labeled "exposure to change" and "cognitive flexibility," what he considered to be the most important features required for the process of individual modernization.

By the mid-1970s the ideas embodied in the "dominant paradigm" of the previous two or three decades were called into question. The role of communication as the central "mover" in the development process was acknowledged to be substantially limited by political, economic, cultural, and other factors, leading practitioners to the recognition that communication was perhaps best conceptualized as a *complement* to development.

This overview has dealt with only a few of the multitude of development theories advanced since the 1950s, namely, those that most often provided the conceptual background for the impressively large number of development assistance projects carried out or sponsored by Western governments and scientists. Some of the projects having to do explicitly with communications are covered in section 3, below; section 2 presents an assessment of that experience from a Third World perspective.

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PEDRO F. HERNÁNDEZ-RAMOS  
AND WILBUR SCHRAMM

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