

# Critical Perspectives on Communication for Development: Reading Paulo Freire's "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*"

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**Abstract:** Paulo Freire is considered as one of the well-known development philosophers of the twentieth century. His philosophy of development/liberation has influenced almost all the areas of social science and humanities including communication and literacy studies. Starting from his contribution to the field of educational philosophy to development theory, Paulo Freire has left an uncontestable mark in the field of critical literacy, popularly termed by him as "conscientization", or "critical consciousness". His idea on dialogic - pedagogy has revolutionary potentials to reorganize the communication structure and the understanding on the concept of development. However, except for a few communications for development theorist, such as Jan Servaes, the application of Paulo's thoughts in the field of development communication and its approaches seems more or less invisible in the academic and professional discourse. Keeping these facts in context, the paper here aims to reorient the discourse on development communication with a critical posture by a close reading of Paulo Freire's "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*". This would challenge the existing narratives on development communication by reconnecting it with the liberation philosophy of Paulo Freire as elucidated in his influential text.

**Keywords:** dialogic - pedagogy, conscientization, critical consciousness, critical posture, liberation philosophy, Paulo Freire

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I critically reflect upon Paulo Freire's "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" in context of its relevance in the discourses on development and development communication. The ideas put forward by Paulo Freire may be applied in the field of development communication from two major perspectives. The first one is concerning the "pedagogy of development" and the second one is on the "pedagogy of communication and participation". Pedagogy of development is often related to the process and ways of understanding and materializing the concept of development, whereas pedagogy of communication is related to the understanding of communication and its role in the process of social participation facilitating development. Usually, the philosophical thoughts expounded by Paulo Freire have been applied in the field of research on curriculum studies, critical literacy, and pedagogy or teaching and learning starting from school education to university education. Though an educational philosopher by training, Freire has left an irrefutable mark in the philosophy of development, and human liberation connected with the process of human "understanding" often from a dialogical and empathic perspective. Paulo's philosophy on critical praxis/conscientization has its origin in the critical traditions of Post Marxist thoughts advocated by the theorists of the Institute of Social Research (ISR) or popularly known as Frankfurt School through the works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and many others.

### Pedagogy, Development and New Humanism

Paulo's philosophy of development and humanism is based on the process of liberation of the self and society from the unseen and invisible violence perpetuated through an oppressive social structure or relations of social production. Freire has experimented with such an approach in literacy promotion in the case of the illiterate peasants of Brazil empowering those peasants to liberate themselves from the

oppressive conditions of the society. Such a doctrine of liberation propagated by Paulo Freire calls for the participation of the people from the margin and periphery in the process of development thereby facilitating an alternative and inclusive model of development. Such a participatory approach to development has the potential to change the existing relations of social and cultural production. As a critical practitioner, Paulo Freire, by doing so, has given a call to the humanity to challenge the existing relations of production by accommodating the world of differences starting from the dissimilar and alternative perspectives on the process of construction of knowledge to the different world views based on diverse ethno - religious, linguistic and cultural orientations of people. Along with the participatory approach, Paulo's philosophy on education, development, and liberation seeks to challenge the existing social structure or dominant social relations of production/social order. Reading Paulo Freire therefore gives us an opportunity to develop a critical sense of understanding of the world, and it teaches us how to develop the ability to question the dominating social forces that control the day to day affairs of the world. Such a critical sense of engagement with the socio - political and cultural order has been termed by Freire as "conscientization"/critical consciousness. Besides, being a state of condition of the human mind, critical consciousness or as termed by Freire, conscientization/ conscientização (in Portuguese) may also be considered as an important development index considering the deceptive forces, that all over rule the world. As Thomas Tufte and Paulo Mefalopulos (2009) point out, what is central in the methodology propounded by Freire in the cases of learning and knowledge construction to the process of materializing human development is that all the stakeholders must actively participate in the process rather than accepting a pre - established model and order of development. According to this dialogical or participatory model as developed by Freire, liberation refers to what Tufte and Paulo Mefalopulos (2009) asserts, "The empowerment

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of citizens by their active involvement in the identification of problems, development of solutions and implementation of strategies” (p.07). Pedagogically, therefore, the problems associated with development communication often concern around two aspects as mentioned earlier. One is on the aspect of “pedagogy of development” and the other one is on the aspect of “pedagogy of communication”. In this context, Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” stands relevant as a result of its connection with the process of liberation of the oppressed from the unseen and unending numbers of violence, at the center of them lies the “epistemological” one. Epistemological violence is related with the dominant process or method of human understanding on the concept of development and communication. The development philosophy of Friere is otherwise aimed at liberating the humanity from all forms of violence. Epistemological violence, which is considered to be at the center of all forms of violence, is often connected with a defective pedagogical structure in relation to the processes of human understanding and a flawed orientation towards development and development communication. Critical perspectives challenge such functional modalities when it comes to development and development communication. By doing so, critical perspectives liberate the process of development and communication from colonial imperatives and makes the process of development and communication more participatory and inclusive in nature.

#### **Understanding Development Communication: Its Pedagogy and Practice**

The problems associated with the conceptualization of development communication or as it is popularly termed as C4D is structural in character. Such a conceptualization is always connected with the issues of inequalities in terms of the capacity to understand/know development, ability to communicate, and access to media that stimulates the process of development. Development communication as a field of study, research and application, thus, is based on the necessities and processes of structural changes in the social order starting from the existing class relations to defined gender roles within different societies often facilitated by media representation and communication. Further, development communication is also connected with the communication structures of different countries across the world which so far has been perceived to be very dominating or linear in nature as it promotes the voices of a particular class of the society and disregards the voices of the rest who are in the margin. Such a structure of the communication order perpetuates the existing mechanism of domination in the socio - cultural spheres of different societies especially in the countries of the global south and east. Considering such dominating social, cultural, political, and economic forces that pervade the globe, the role of communication has become an essential component in the process of development as it can facilitate people’s participation and access to socio - cultural space. In practice, development communication is often designed and applied keeping in context the understanding that we have about development, and the larger necessities of communication to restructure the relations of social production through access to and participation in the political, economic, and cultural affairs of the world. But unfortunately, the discourses on development have always been dominated by an idea of

development imagined through the eyes of the colonial masters, especially, the European nations, which were the settlers across the globe starting from 15<sup>th</sup> century AD to 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even today, the countries of the west continue to control the imagination of south and east through the archived colonial history and the neo - colonial forces of media and entertainment thereby motivating and directing the process of change and development with some sort of colonial interest. Such a control over the imaginary process of development and change has its negative impacts on the process of development in the countries of the global south as they are still struggling to liberate them from the problem of mass poverty and exploitation. Theoretically, the origin of such a dominant discourse goes back to the anticipated optimism about the prospects of the post - colonial world which geared up to match with its earlier colonial counterparts following the modernization logic. Modernization perspectives emphasized on top - down approach to communication with an ethnocentric and authoritarian view of development abandoning the various alternative locations of the sources of knowledge and perspectives about development. Later, such a dominant order, however, has been challenged by critical/alternative perspective of development. Alternative perspectives have been more inclusive in character as they respect the alternative ways of understanding the self and society thereby constituting the social order. In the process, the discourse on development and development communication has gone through a constant struggle between different paradigms. At the center of the struggle between different paradigms of development lies the concept of human understanding on development and communication. In this context, alternative development attempts to deconstruct the discourse of development, thereby offering a new way of thinking about complex problems associated with development and articulating new and alternative ways to resolve them for the larger benefit of the world. Critical perspectives on development are very emancipatory in nature, and they are often associated with alternative ways of seeing the world or the affairs of the world liberating them from the colonial ways of understanding. Such an approach questions the dominant patterns of understanding often motivated by modernism as a form of social, political, and cultural discourse of the prevailing world order. Critical perspective is always connected with postmodernism, considered to be a set of alternative socio - cultural, political, epistemological attitudes that facilitate the evolution of an alternative world order/world view both in theory and practice. Criticality or critical praxis is related to understanding the problem differently than its usual methods often from a post - structural perspective. It often resists the dominant epistemological orders or theory of knowledge and challenges the concept of a given “self” and its location within the larger social order of the globe by articulating alternative space for an “acquired self”. The concept of an acquired self/ liberated identity is directly connected with the process of development. Such individual or collective identity is constructed through mutual dialogue. This is realized through alternative ways of constructing knowledge/understanding about the self, and situating its location within the larger context of the relations of social and cultural production. Considering this fact, development must start with the process of reconstituting the self,

motivated by an alternative understanding or an alternative epistemology of development and reconnecting it with the relationship between liberation of the self and liberation of the society. This, of course, is possible by reorienting ourselves with alternative epistemological perspectives.

To further reflect upon the process of “understanding”, what I sense is the fact that, it has had always an impact on the process of development and communication. Because at some point, “understanding” as a process itself becomes a type of communication. It is the process of understanding/seeing, that further determines the condition of the being, or in this case, “development”. It is the understanding of the “concept of development” that constructs its processes, and in the end, ‘the processes of understanding’ becomes apart in the entire process of development; which most often is not emphasized upon much in the discourses on development. So the main objective here is to reorient “understanding” or “knowing”/ knowing development, deviating from its usual patterns as prescribed in the theory of modernization that experiences the problem of development from a distance, and without participation. Through critical praxis, as explained by Paulo Freire, the process of understanding is not restricted or limited to a particular point of view, rather it constitutes of different perspectives and points of views which evolve as a result of constant action and reflection in the part of the knower. Such a practice promotes pluralism of thoughts and ideas which are the starting point of a revolutionary and multicultural society if we see multiculturalism and revolutionism from the perspective of development. However, such a revolutionary practice/ understanding is rarely experienced as a result of the onslaught of market forces on the process of constructing knowledge and conducting research/ understanding, connected with the dominant epistemological orders of the world society. To further reflect upon the process of understanding and being/ development, what I sense is the fact that, it is so, because there is always a dialectical relationship between “being” and “understanding” or “being” and “seeing”. More conclusively, what this refers to is the fact that, it is the ways of “understanding development” that conditions the “process of development”. Moreover, it is the “ways of seeing” which constitutes the relations of social production. Alternative ways of seeing therefore constructs alternative social order by changing the existing inequalities in power relations as power is always mediated through the process of understanding and human perception. Unfortunately, such a rigorous and multiperspectival understanding is rarely encouraged in academics and also in the professional lives that is highly regulated by an accepted epistemology often conditioned by the logic of the market. If we further delve deep into this problem, it becomes very clear that the market logic has not even spared the university education as the pedagogical approaches under different disciplines are in the midst of a serious crisis as whether to go along with a market pedagogy that supports the ideology of the market or a liberal pedagogy that challenges the discourses of the dominant epistemological and social order. Considering this fact, the pedagogical approach to understanding development and communication must take a liberal stance in line with the ideas put forward by Paulo Freire, to challenge the existing power inequalities which have been mediated through a

colonial process of understanding, knowing, and promoting development.

### **Development Communication: A Critical Review**

In the initial part of this paper, I reflected upon the concept of understanding and its relationship with knowledge/understanding and development/liberation. For this purpose, I used development and liberation interchangeably. In the following few paragraphs, I attempt to reflect upon understanding of the concept of development communication from a critical point of view. Critical pedagogy as explained by Paulo Freire aims at the emancipation and liberation of humanity from the oppressive social relations/ power relations. In this context, the role of development communication is to facilitate the process of liberation by engaging the community members in a dialogical communication. Such a process will allow the construction of a dialogic social space with the help a communication structure which is participatory in nature. Unlike a top - down transmission model or communication structure in the dominant/modernization paradigm of development, the critical paradigm emphasizes upon the dialogical nature of communication with a horizontal structure. Further, the process of construction of knowledge/understanding under critical paradigm is dialogical/participatory and it liberates the structure of knowledge from the colonial necessities of oppression, exploitation, and dominance. One can say, critical perspectives on development communication are a resistance to the epistemological violence that is structurally perpetuated through the modernist approach to understanding on communication and knowledge about development.

So far as development communication is concerned, it has been almost 60 years or more since different international agencies are engaged in research, theory building and strategy making in the area of communication for development. Since then the role of communication in the process of development is viewed from varied perspectives. In the process, the usual understanding about the concept of development and communication as it was under the dominant paradigm/modernization theory has been challenged by various alternative models of development and communication. One among such paradigms of development is liberation theology. Paulo Freire’s philosophy of development is based on liberation theological perspective that advocates for the liberation of the individuals as a true form of development which is also termed as humanization. Humanization is a liberating experience for both the oppressors and the oppressed that calls for the participation of voices from the margin/periphery. It not only takes place in terms of the act of communication but also genuine participation in the process of development, and understanding the various problems related to development through a participatory action research. Under such a model of development, the developmental necessities are not imposed upon by external agencies from a distance but rather the developmental necessities are mutually constructed by the community for which development is meant for.

### **Communication, Participation and Liberation: A Critical Pedagogical Approach**

The necessity of liberation is understood well by none other than those who are oppressed. This has been explained very well by Paulo Freire in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in *Portuguese* in the year 1968 and later translated into English in 1970. Development, as understood by Freire, is closely connected with the struggle for liberation, and establishing a democratic condition of life facilitated by a condition of knowledge that is free from the dominance of oppressive social forces. In this context, if the world civilization wants to see itself in a developed condition, then certainly it has to liberate itself from the unnecessary oppressions that pervade the globe. This makes the process of development and liberation quite synonymous and interchangeable with each other. Further, it is of utmost significance to mention here that liberation/development of the world society is only possible by the active participation of the oppressed or those who are marginalized in the process of development, simultaneously, liberating both the oppressed and their oppressors. So, it is only the oppressed that has the ability to liberate the oppressors along with the liberation of them. Marginalization often takes place when a certain section of population is either positioned in a lower status in the social hierarchy/structure compared to the rest of the populace or if they are isolated from the rest of the society as a result of multiple reasons starting from their level and quality of education to gender, sex, caste, race, religion, access to media, access to information and many other social and economic attributes. Out of the above mentioned attributes, access to information and communication is the most important indicators of development and liberation, especially in today's mediated society.

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