

**STATEMENT BY LUIS RAMIRO BELTRAN AT THE ADVISORY BOARD MEETING OF
THE KNIGHT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL MEDIA AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI
ON FEBRUARY 27, 2008 (BY CONFERENCE CALL)**

Good morning, dear colleagues:

I am very sorry not to be present in person at the Board Meeting due to an unexpected health problem. But I am very glad to be in touch with you at least for a moment through this means.

Congratulations to our colleague and friend Sanjeev Chatterjee for the initiative and for the excellent organization of this encounter. I wish you all much success and satisfaction in your deliberations.

The Master Plan of the Center is an innovative, ambitious and creative exercise, which is already in the process of implementation.

Its central aim is to help people in many parts of the world to learn to communicate more easily across national borders so as to be better endowed to solve their problems. This is a most plausible purpose.

Also commendable is the fact that the Plan has as its operational framework and launching pad the eight Milenium Goals formulated and proclaimed by the United Nations. By doing so, the center clearly commits itself to join the struggle to help overcome underdevelopment, which is still gravely affecting the majority of the world's population. And, as I see it, this means the Center's Program of Activities comes to be an International Program of Development Communication through both traditional and new media. This implies an educational approach to attain social change.

In fact, wisely conceived, the Anchor Projects – one already in operation and another now ready to start – and the coming six are evidently built to provide instrumental communication support to the priority development goals adopted..

Fortunately, the Center counts on appropriate institutional resources – human, material and financial – to efficiently implement its program, plans and projects.

Assets for operation are: the availability of an arsenal of multiple media of interdisciplinary cooperation possibilities and of facilities to combine production, research and training.

In summary, all looks well in the horizon.

Nevertheless, I feel it may be convenient for us to involve ourselves in reflection about development, about communication for development and about the new technologies.

Activities for national development started to be internationally supported shortly after the end of World War II when the United States of America established an agency to provide financial and technical assistance for it to the underdeveloped countries.

Many funds, much knowledge and energy, as well as hopes, were invested towards that end. But already by the middle of the 50s became evident that material advancements were benefitting only minorities and democratic development was not taking place.

In the 70s a deep international economic crisis produced rather further underdevelopment in the so called “developing countries” because of internal domination of the people by conservative, mercantile and authoritarian elites.

Then, in the early 80s the advent of globalization and neoliberalism brought with it new optimism. But it took only a few years to become evident that development efforts were being enjoyed more than ever before only by the few mighty ones. In fact, by the middle of the 90s the gap between the rich and the poor far from being reduced had greatly expanded and democracy was still nominal in most of the “Third World”.

I wonder if this may be the kind of “development” that our program could perhaps be inadvertently supporting. I very much hope such will not be the case. We must strive for a truly democratic development aimed not only to material growth and wellbeing for the few at the expense of misery, exclusion and submission for most of our people. And this real development has to be based on equity and liberty for all citizens if we are going to achieve true democracy.

Sadly enough, neither is communication for development in the “Third World” a democratic undertaking. At the national level cultural domination is exerted by the power elites through concentration of ownership of media in the service of their political and commercial ends. For the most part, press, radio, television and films are used ignoring the masses and favoring the status quo. And the developing countries are dependent of the developed ones that for external information since news agencies, advertising firms and survey enterprises are mighty transnationals controlling the market. Furthermore, as a rule, mass media are not too concerned with development activities and issues and do not regard educational information as a part of their duties with society.

I assume these realities will be taken into account by the Center since to “*transform the global journalism and communication profession*” is a part of its mission and given that it intends “*to develop new media models and methods for empowering the future leaders of the communication field*”. Am I right or am I wrong in making this assumption?

As for the new technologies the situation is no different. The divide between the developed countries and the developing ones is abysmal. Even within each of the latter – at least in Latin America – said technologies are another privilege of the upper classes.

And in those countries having a significant proportion of autochthonous population – such as Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia – the gap between them and the urban upper and middle classes is enormous. Some meritorious efforts are being conducted in Latin America to alleviate this unfair and harmful situation by a few governments and non-governmental organizations. But the scale of it is still very modest.

As it is well known, technologies are not intrinsically bad or good. This depends on by whom and for whom they are used as much as on how they are used. But the fascination of handling marvelous gadgets produces such a level of enthusiastic addiction that many people tend to attribute only virtues to the present new technologies.

If communication for development – through old and new media – is to help change the situation so that it favors the majorities, it must secure access, dialogue and participation on an egalitarian basis for each and every citizen of a country. Only in that manner genuine democracy will become attainable.

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