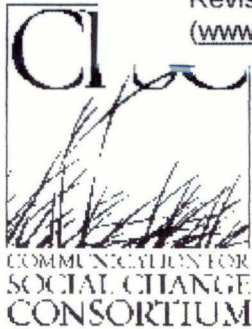


Gumucio Dagrón, Alfonso (2004) **Interview with Luis Ramiro Beltrán: "I've lived my life as a communication artist, not a scientist"** (November 2004): Consortium dialogues. Revista Electrónica MAZI no. 1 of the Communication for Social Change Consortium. ([www.communicationforsocialchange.org/](http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/))



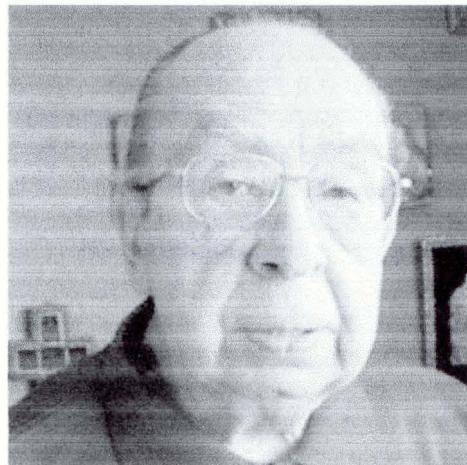
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## Consortium Dialogues

### Interview With Luis Ramiro Beltrán: 'I've Lived | a Communication Artist, Not a Scientist' (Novem 2004)

Luis Ramiro Beltrán is undoubtedly one of Latin America's key development communication practice and his writings cover more than 40 years of contributions to the field of communication change. Bolivian by birth, he was among the first to question the paradigms that emerged in during the 1960s and early 1970s. He proposed instead concepts of participatory and horizon inspired in Paulo Freire's writings on education. It is an honour for **MAZI** to interview Luis Ra first issue. The CFSC Consortium's Alfonso Gumucio-Dagrón conducted the interview.



*Gumucio Dagrón: If we agree that, until ver was no academic discipline of communicatio and social change as such, how did you and generation become specialists?*

**Beltrán:** In my own case it happened by acc give you a long answer and dig into my mem old when I started working as a journalist for where I was born. After a while, I decided to and started working in another daily, *La Raz* time was the most influential newspaper of B following the nationalist revolution of April 19 impossible to continue publishing it, as the pi of the three large mining industry owners, Ce Aramayo. Suddenly, I found myself unemplo managed by contributing to a weekly humour *Momento*, a news programme on Radio El C commercial advertising and public relations,

correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. I was young and hardworking but also a bohemian. I everything, mostly for spending long nights out, rather than getting up early.

One morning in August 1953, a "gringo" by the name of Frank Shideler came to my door. I h before, but Mercedes de la Reza, a schoolmate of mine, had recommended I get to know him me that the Bolivian and the United States governments had signed a cooperation agreemer American Agricultural Service (*Servicio Agrícola Interamericano*, or *SAI*). Shideler was the di information and extension and wanted me to work with him. I did thank him for his thoughtful because I felt neither capable nor interested in agricultural issues. In addition, the salary he i so attractive. He listened carefully and then drew out his magic weapon: He offered me a tw scholarship to study "audiovisual education" in Puerto Rico, including film production and gra accepted a trial of three months with flexible office hours. I did succumb to his persuasive of Shideler then became my first mentor and teacher for communication for development.

He did honour his word. By December 1953, after he evaluated my performance satisfactoril Puerto Rico to participate with 15 other Latin Americans in the First International Seminar on Education, sponsored by the predecessor of USAID, the Foreign Operations Administration. was followed by workshops at the Faculty of Agronomy of the University of Puerto Rico and Education Centre, which the U.S. government had established under the direction of Fred W

This is how I got my first theoretical orientation on the educational uses of communication, w States had learned and developed from its experience in the Second World War. They woul "development." Instead, they used "progress" and "modernization." I enjoyed learning the es-producing films and using photography for rural education, as well as acquiring the skills to c

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posters and educational brochures using silkscreen techniques. The study of communication was interesting, and I loved the beauty of the island, which was populated by good people in process of "modernizing" and moving from their neo-colonial status to that of a "free association."

At the end of our training, the participants, all of whom were from government information agencies, created the Latin American Association of Audiovisual Education, and I was elected president. Packing to go back to our countries, Florence Thomason, from the FOA Latin American desk in Washington, was selecting one third of the participants for a six-month scholarship in that which would be funded by the Department of Agriculture. I was one of those selected, and Flo was my godmother of my future career. I still have warm memories of affection and gratitude for Frank.

There was no single communication for development training programme in the US. Actually, the entire country was there an academic department that would provide that type of training. Her universities they had "centres of excellence" with various strengths, such as the production of audio and documentary films, "audience psychology", writing texts for peasants, design of audiovisual radio. I just mention the courses I decided to take at Pennsylvania State University, Michigan State University, University of Wisconsin, University of Vermont and Louisiana State University. All this training in audiovisual communication skills, and we were still a few years away from the first attempts. Lerner's theory of communication and modernisation and even further from the voices of others in this new discipline, such as Wilbur Schramm and Everett Rogers. It was in the United States that I met Juan Diaz Bordenave, a Paraguayan rural communication specialist, with whom I built a life-long friendship. He became one of the most prominent representatives of this discipline in Latin America.

In 1954, after a short period in Turrialba, Costa Rica, at the InterAmerican Institute of Agricultural Sciences of the Organization of American States, I returned to Bolivia, most happy with the opportunities that something I could have never dreamed before, considering that in my country there was no : to study journalism, let alone communication for development. As I had agreed, I joined the : Interamericano and helped Frank strengthen the Bureau of Information and Extension. We produced a poster for a young farmer from Santa Cruz, and many flyers, brochures, posters using silkscreen, as well as radio producers. For the first time I had the opportunity to do fieldwork with indigenous peasants who were enthusiastic about the revolution, and I learned to admire them in many respects. However, I was fired. My boss, Shideler resigned because of misunderstandings with his boss, and I did the same in my country. My boss, mentor and friend.

It was at that moment that, guided by Jorge Ruiz, a young and brilliant filmmaker, I was introduced to my second love—after journalism, which I practised since I was a kid—and became a scriptwriter. It was the award-winning documentary, "Vuelve Sebastiana," which focused on the culture of the people of Oruro. Though I enjoyed the experience at that moment, I didn't realize I was among the first in this discipline, in which the art of social communication was used in the service of public interest.

Early in 1955 I received an invitation from Claudio Volio, head of Project 39 at the OAS Technical Program in Costa Rica, to work at the Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences' educational rural communication service for the region. My name had been suggested by Armando and Rogelio Coto, both of whom I had met briefly the year before. I was honoured by their invitation and inclined to accept the offer, since I didn't want to leave my country for a long period and leave my mother and sister also a journalist, alone. However, she convinced me it would be a mistake to decline the offer.

By that time the economic situation in the country during the initial revolutionary government was difficult, and hundreds of citizens who opposed it were forced into exile or were sent to camps. My mother was hard to survive, and she felt proud that her son had been invited, being only 25 years old, to work for an international organisation, which provided a more stable income. Those who had worked as journalists for the conservative newspaper *La Razón*, including myself, were harassed by the government, even if they had not been involved in any anti-government activity. In view of this situation, and encouraged by my mother, I accepted the job for one year and travelled to Costa Rica in September 1955. I had no idea then that it was the first step of an international career that kept me away from Bolivia for 34 years. It was one year in Costa Rica that my mother came to join me. From 1955 to 1960, I was based in Costa Rica, working extensively throughout Latin America. Among my colleagues was Juan Diaz Bordenave, who was a professor of university students and government staff in the principles and techniques of communicative development. We also provided technical and organisational assistance to public entities to create and improve communication services. We also frequently produced publications with technical content for the benefit of rural development institutions in the region.

In 1956, I took three weeks off to write the script for "The Ximul," a documentary by Jorge Ruiz about rural development in Guatemala. By 1961, after a workshop on television production at New York University, I transferred to the regional Andean office of IICA in Lima, along with Juan Diaz Bordenave and Enrique Sánchez Narvaez. By 1964, I was decided to apply for a fellowship for postgraduate studies in communication.

in the United States. Again, I was reluctant to compete because I felt I was not good at number the core of research studies. I was afraid of failure. However both my director and my mother apply. I was surprised to be awarded the fellowship and applied to the Michigan State University. Michigan was pioneering studies in communication, with a vision for its usefulness for international development.

I apologise for offering such a detailed account, but your question has prompted me to review professional life, something I haven't done very often in interviews.

My studies in Michigan, a prestigious and dynamic academic institution, were to produce my professional and private life. I arrived to East Lansing, Michigan, along with my mother, in 1965. In that year I studied only those courses, including statistics, I needed to get my undergraduate degree. I started with the credits for the master's degree and eventually for the Ph.D. I had to read a course, and often write short papers, which required at least 12 hours every day, including work hard for me, but beautiful. I had never had the opportunity before to read so much, to reflect with professors and students, and to live a life entirely devoted to learning, researching and teaching.

I was lucky to have among my professors Dr. David Berlo, a brilliant linguistics specialist and field of communication; and Everett Rogers, already famous for his diffusion of innovations theory, the privilege of being an assistant to both. I owe them much. Professor Rogers became my master. Professor Berlo my Ph.D. advisor. The first thesis [1], in 1968, was a compendium of the state of communication for development that existed at that time, followed by my suggestions on future research and enhancing the practical applications. The second thesis [2], in 1970, was a diagnosis of communication and development in Latin America, characterised by external domination, by the United States, and the internal dominance of the wealthy minorities over the majority. The state imposed model of development—materialist, conservative and anti-democratic—and proposed that communication could help change it.

It may sound paradoxical, but I fully became aware of the almost neo-colonial context of Latin America during my years of study in the U.S. Given the vast literature available at Michigan State University about the nature of our society, economy and culture while I was physically far from our region, I was convinced that our region needed profound structural changes. And for this to happen, we had to change communication itself, struggling to democratise for the benefit of the impoverished, exploited people. Before Michigan I didn't have a clear idea of the situation in our countries, which is why my companion Juan Diaz Bordenave and other pioneers of development communication in our region worked with "blindness," convinced of the power of mass media in development programmes; technology, but I couldn't see the underlying political issues. After Michigan I had a different perspective, transformed the way I worked in our region when I went back to Colombia in 1970 as the Director of the American Centre for Rural Development and Agrarian Reform, a branch of the IICA at OAS. Communication for development had changed radically.

*Gumucio Dagron: About 15 to 20 years ago, university journalism departments in Latin America change their names and became faculties or departments of "social communication." How is it adding marketing, advertising and public relations, the content of studies didn't change much. Universities are still unable to train communicators who are capable of contributing to social change. Handful, less than 1% of the existing academic programmes, offer communication for development. This general apathy persist in the academic world?*

**Beltrán:** With very few exceptions, universities in our region—and particularly private academies—seldom related to the needs and concerns of their own societies; they do not take into account politics, culture and economy. The teachings they offer seem to serve intellectual demands and the professional requirements of the middle and higher classes. During the past 30 years, they have responded to the demands of the private entrepreneurial sector, establishing new areas of professional study, definitely more akin to the market, business administration, public relations and marketing. In the increasing number of communication schools created in the last 40 years, few break away from the traditional pattern. Most prepare communication professionals for the world of business, not for the service sector. They seem incapable of seeing that communication for development is an important discipline. I am convinced that there are not many opportunities for communication specialists, except for the journalism, advertising, marketing, and even more recently, political propaganda and public relations. The bottom line, unfortunately, is that universities in Latin America have no real commitment to the structural changes necessary to build a more just and prosperous democratic society. That's why they don't invest in communication and education for social change.

*Gumucio Dagron: Please describe a communicator for development and social change. How do they differ from a journalist?*

**Beltrán** : The main characteristic of communicators for development is their determination to public service. This usually drives them—particularly in the context of Latin America—to commit the service of social justice and change.

The main difference between journalists and communicators for development is that the latter communication mainly as a tool for enhancing people's education for the betterment of their thrust of journalists is news, whereas the development communicator struggles for a change people can succeed in overcoming underdevelopment, injustice and authoritarianism.

**Gumucio Dagron** : *One of the topics that have come back in force in recent years is "communication. You were deeply involved with this issue 30 years ago, when UNESCO and others recomme developing countries establish their own information and communication policies to counter influence of global hegemonic media. How can you assess that experience, and how much is today?*

**Beltrán** : The attempts to encourage developing countries to design and apply their own communication policies, from which pluralistic strategies and plans were to develop, were frustrating. During with UNESCO's encouragement and support, the theoretical and political fundamentals were developing such policies. Sadly, they didn't go further than research and reflection or state government. This was mainly due to the hard and tenacious opposition to the proposed changes pluralistic, democratic and peaceful. Huge transnational alliances of media owners and operators, most part, commercially driven and conservative. They consider any attempts to establish real "press freedom," which is actually "business freedom." On the other hand, there was a risk of which were abundant in our region in those years—would perversely benefit from applying their own profit.

We must also admit that while working on these new democratizing changes in policies, we had to involve key civil society organisations. No union or political party was kept in the loop. No one mobilised to support the scheme. The only exceptions were the associations of Catholic communication professionals, who managed to commit the Church's hierarchy. In fact the Church was the only institution that identified with the movement.

If there is any lesson learned from previous experiences, it is the need to adjust the original project to key organisations in each community, to opinion leaders and politicians, to avoid preaching to the choir.

**Gumucio Dagron**: *In terms of democratic communication and the civil society struggle for communication rights, are we worse off than we were than we were 30 years ago?*

**Beltrán**: Today's world scene is ambiguous. The idea that communication should be horizontal and participatory to support democratic development seems to have reached further than the actual. However, the practice of this approach to communication has been subjugated by the unrelenting commercial media and doesn't seem to have the strength it had during the 70s and 80s.

On the other hand, the new communication and information technologies now available have increased information access for the people. As for communication and citizens' rights, there are some developments, perhaps more conceptual than operational. During this last decade, an international movement has grown to struggle for information and communication rights, which is not simply a synonym for freedom for the few but a right of all citizens. We have also seen the emergence of media communication regulation in mass media and regulation, promoted by civil society. Fresh theoretical approaches to current worldwide discussion on the "Information Society" now includes the issue of democratic communication.

**Gumucio Dagron** : *Since the 1960s, Latin America contributed to the theory of development through authors inspired by the socio-political reality and informed by concrete knowledge of communication: for the people, horizontal and participatory. However, most books on communication published in English do not acknowledge the pioneering contribution of Latin America. Why is this?*

**Beltrán** : There's a lot of ignorance in English-speaking countries about Latin American communication theory. One explanation is that our literature hasn't shown up very often in English publications. However, this shouldn't amaze us, because even in academic publications in Spanish and Portuguese, papers on communication for development were seldom printed.

More importantly, the scarce Latin American literature on communication for development is about social change and democratic values, whereas in academic institutions of the United States, the dominant vision of social sciences uncontaminated with politics. Therefore, they do not grant any valid

trustworthiness to Latin American research, as empirical as it may be. U.S. academics could recognise the pioneering contributions of the Latin American region. Exceptions include Eve more than one book and several interviews, acknowledged his own change in perspective of communication, thanks to Latin American researchers. In addition, I can mention some other such as Brenda Dervin, Emil McAnany and Robert White.

**Gumucio Dagron** : *Your own career in communication for development expands over 40 ye ideas evolved during these decades?*

**Beltrán** : I'm afraid I don't know the answer, at least with certainty, because I've never done comparing my ways of thinking communication over the years. This may have to do with the half a century working on the same subject, I've never been an established professor or rese academic institutions. I've earned my living as a communication artist, not a scientist. Someti earned my income working in development programmes not direcdly related to communicati

I dare say my position has not changed in any radical way, except in some specific areas. I t essential principles without any fear of being labelled a conservative, since I learned from my scientist—different from a politician, a lawyer or a journalist—is always ready to review what and to discard it if there is reason, including even his most cherished ideas. That said, I neve conviction that our society is currently unjust and anti-democratic, and I never relinquish the communication will help change it. The society I denounced in the 1970s not only has not im many ways and, largely because of globalisation and neo-liberalism, it has worsened. There involution instead of evolution. I cannot abandon then the utopian ideal of social justice.

[1] *Communication and Modernization: Significance, Roles and Strategies* . MA Thesis, Mict University, East Lansing, Michigan, United States, 1968. (Unpublished).

[2] *Communication in Latin America: Persuasion for Status Quo or for National Development* Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, United States, 1970.

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