

# Turning point. North-south dialogue

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## North–South Dialogue

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THERE IS A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE between a dialogue and a monologue. The former is imbued with the ideas of sharing, mutuality, maturity and learning; the latter, with ideas of lecturing, preaching and self-absorption. Another way to term the two modes would be ‘conversation’ compared with ‘instructions’. Unfortunately, dialogue is difficult to achieve in any situation where there is power imbalance. Characteristically, power-holders are able to dominate space and access to platforms; they may set agendas, manipulate resources and exclude critics. Power imbalance is almost always reflected in unequal communication, at micro-levels, for example, within families, and at the macro-levels of international politics.

For much of the 20th century, there were several important dialogue deficits in the international arena. Perhaps the most glaring was between men and women. In the vast majority of countries, and usually until very recently or still now, public debate has been dominated by males. Another was between the colonial powers and the colonised populations. Communication, such as it was, comprised for the most part directives formulated in metropolitan (usually European) capitals and

implemented in colonised regions of the world. This one-way traffic was somewhat offset by the formation of colonial elites, for example in countries such as India and Egypt. A significant number of young people, usually the sons of families that had become wealthy by association with colonial rulers, gained access to Western education, sometimes at the most prestigious institutions such as Oxford University or the Sorbonne. Many of them became influential in the de-colonisation processes that took place after the Second World War. And a third was between elites and non-elites within all countries, but especially developing ones, which often had a non-democratic government, a controlled press and little freedom of expression.

A simple grid (Fig. 1) might illustrate how some of these points looked in earlier generations.

I believe the trends illustrated in Figure 1 are currently undergoing a massive transformation. There are many reasons for this transformation; to highlight three briefly: one is the shift of economic power, education and advanced technology from the West to Asia; another is the complex of interactions loosely called globalisation; and the third, possibly the most impor-

|                                  |   |  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Western elites</b>            | <i>Some interactivity, but usually on Western terms, institutions and languages</i> | <b>'The rest of the world' elites</b>      |
| <i>Top-down communication to</i> |   | <i>Top-down communication to</i>           |
| <b>Western populations</b>       | <i>Little communication</i>   | <b>'The rest of the world' populations</b> |

**Figure 1** TRADITIONAL LINES OF COMMUNICATION

tant, is the explosive growth of Internet-based communication.

The recessions of 2008 and beyond have probably speeded up a phenomenon that was already under way: wealth production, and to a significant extent technological skills, are spreading well outside the traditional rich countries. By far the greatest number of doctors, engineers and IT experts in the coming century are expected to be from India and China; manufacturing and software engineering will also be centred in Asia; banks and financial institutions will have extremely important bases in the Arab world. With globalisation, there will be a continued blurring of international boundaries, in all senses. People and goods will move more, and more quickly; transactions will be instantaneous; supply chains ever more integrated. And current developments on the Internet-based media will make traditional journalism virtually redundant. No longer will elites simply convey 'news' to populations via a handful of newspapers and traditional TV stations. There are no more 'gate-keepers' who determine what information will or will not be made public or given prominence. Instead, in every country, a huge number of 'citizen-journalists' cover events as they happen, with mobile phones, blogs and an ever-growing array of techniques. These days, every person can be a journalist, a pressure-group activist and a consumer of reporting—sometimes brilliant, sometimes skewed and inflammatory—at the click of a mouse. It is true that there is still the digital divide, but it is being bridged every day, and I think before another generation has passed a large proportion of the

world's population will have some kind of instant access to whatever is then the latest incarnation of 'networked communication'.

So, by the early years of this century, some of the restrictive practices had been resolved or at least mitigated in many places. However, there is often a time-lag between new realities and old structures. Perhaps a key example is the continuing 'Atlantic' domination of international organisations: for example, the Bretton Woods complex of massive financial institutions. Sometimes, developing countries may have nominal or formal equalities of expression, but analysts find that in reality the institutions still 'speak' essentially Anglo-American idioms. Superficially, but still importantly, they demand fluency in the English language and associated skills of report-writing, committee management and so on. Advanced degrees from major Western universities are virtually a prerequisite for any appointment. At a deeper level, the modes of operation, the networking and the unspoken rules are all deeply embedded in the cultures of Northern Europe and North America. Dialogue within such institutions or between them and in-country agencies across much of the world will inevitably tend to be one-way traffic. One of the most absurd manifestations of this, left over from the Second World War, is the composition of the UN Security Council's permanent membership: three seats for the US, the UK and France, representing a combined population of about 400 million; no seats for India, Brazil and Nigeria, representing a population of about 1.4 billion (and incidentally no state with a majority Muslim

population out of a world Muslim population of some 1.2 billion, and no state from South America and Africa combined).

How can all this translate into practical suggestions for North–South dialogue at events such as the conferences organised by our Applied Research Centre in Human Security; or more generally, events that aim to address global issues that impact both North and South, such as climate change, ethical supply chains, human rights and war.

First it seems to me painfully obvious that conference organisers in the North, if they are interested in achieving inputs from the South (if not equal inputs, which seems a dream at present), would have to devote a serious amount of energy to making it happen. First, airfares, hotels and internal travel are often far more expensive, as a proportion of personal or institutional income, for delegates from the South than for those from the North. Second, even assuming that sponsorship is available, delegates may face pressures from workplaces that do not want to release them. Third, and especially for travel to the UK, visas are increasingly problematic, so that guest speakers may require considerable visa support: official invitations, letters to consulates, proof of funding and so on. That is just to help people reach the target event.

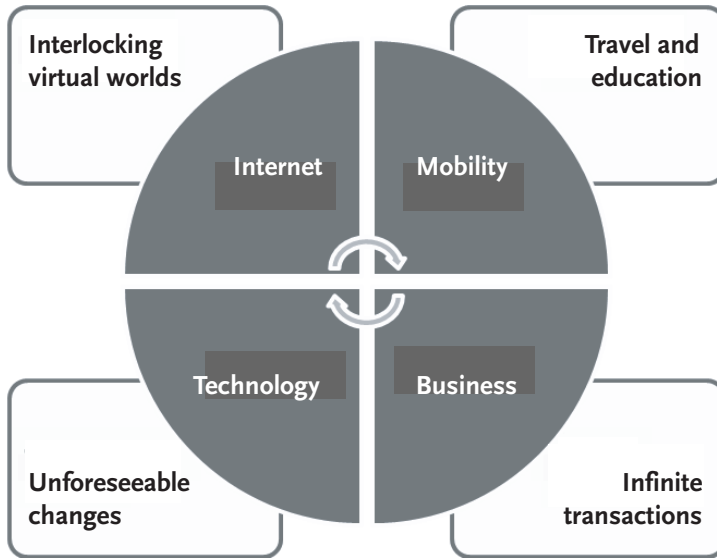
In many ways, an even more challenging, and perhaps rewarding, process is actually getting the most mutual benefit from visitors from the South. Patience and consideration on both sides is often needed. For example, countless individuals are doing wonderful work in appalling conditions in many conflict zones: perhaps conflict resolution, victim protection, emergency aid or other roles. Their experiences and first-hand knowledge are usually far beyond those of Western observers. Yet they may be unused to presenting in public, especially in a foreign language, and may not have the technical apparatus of laptops and videos that make for a conventional ‘lively’ presentation. It is sometimes worth remembering also that visitors from difficult situations are often

caught in a complex of emotions. They may find Western cities unbearably affluent, smug and self-centred. They may feel that lip-service is being paid to international human rights, while arms exporters are supplying repressive regimes. I had a humbling experience one day, when I took a visitor out for a lunchtime meal, a small affair of pizza and French fries. After five minutes looking at his plate, the gentleman (a well-qualified individual) broke down in tears. I asked why, and he told me:

My wife and my mother have not had a meal like this all year. I feel a complete failure because I worked as hard as I could, tried everything I knew, and still I could not provide enough food for my family. I just can’t eat this.

Nor, on the other hand, should we be led into thinking that everything is much better in the West, and that we are doing a favour to a less affluent person by providing a ticket. One Brazilian told me that every time she steps into a tube train in London, she feels very sorry for the people there; especially white people, who, to her eyes, either look irritated, or in a hurry, or sad. They don’t look at each other. Nobody smiles. As she said, in Brazil maybe most people are poor, but at least they smile at each other, make an effort to communicate, help each other to get through the day.

Finally, my hope is that a totally new dynamic will make the old grid redundant. New and old elites, and a significant proportion of the world’s population, whether they like it or not, seem to be headed for a brave new world of instant personal and professional transactions, with people of any class, language and location. The grid becomes more like a circle (Fig. 2)—open to anyone with the interest and some modest resources. I assume that, among this vast group of people, communication will be at least relatively democratic and open, hopefully sometimes challenging as we grow opportunities to ‘Speak Truth to Power’. The framework for more productive and wide-ranging conversation is in place.



**Figure 2** NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE

However, and it is a big reservation, we will always have to remember that, despite this encouraging widening of access, we should foresee an equally huge number of people who will have no access to this kind of optimistic scenario; who will continue to live under severe threat of conflict and starvation; whose human security and life welfare are absolutely miserable. At the same time, the natural environment and the climate will continue to deteriorate massively, probably to a point where large numbers of humans, not to mention other species, are close to destruction. Probably the new forms of dialogue will be the only possible avenue to the creativity and compassion that are urgently needed.



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