

DOMINATION BY "COOPERATION"

A Third World perspective on technology transfer and information

"Technology is like genetic material — it is encoded with the characteristics of the society which developed it, and it tries to reproduce that society." Bruno Wambi is chief librarian of the Central library of Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, Congo, and president of the Congolese Association for the Development of Library and Archival Documents (ACDBA). In this commentary, he argues that Third World cultures are the victims of Western technology transfer, all in the name of development.

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No matter where you are, libraries are tools for social, cultural, and economic progress — integral elements of a country's national development plan. And to do library science is to engage in research and technology. For these reasons, cooperative links between the libraries of the North and those of the South have been established within the framework of development assistance programs.

In practice, unfortunately, the general feeling of euphoria died after the first two development decades. The reason is that the problems of the general masses have not been solved in all the countries of the South. A persistent disenchantment has replaced the illusions that marked the beginning of cooperation. Worse, the gulf between the have and have-not countries has widened, with the wealth of the developed countries having fed itself off the poverty of the underdeveloped countries. As a result, when it comes to imported development models, the Southern countries are hostile toward the donor countries and mistrust them. This disillusionment has driven Third World nations to be more inward-looking, more self-preoccupied, according to Jacques Bang in his book *Quelle voie de développement pour l'Afrique?* (Which development path for Africa?).

Ninety percent of the people in our countries are forced to live in silence because they do not speak the language of technology and progress. Their silence is political, technical, and ideological. The remaining 10 percent of people believe this is the logical state of affairs. What then is the basic condition for development?

I will not rehash the theories which practice has relegated to the garbage can of history — theories such as the universality of science, the neutrality of science, and the premise that science is truth. Science, of course, is neither universal, neutral, nor synonymous with absolute truth. These labels were pinned on science so that it could be used in that great expansionist plan whereby the title "human being" is denied to the other human beings of the planet.

To tell the Third World that science is neutral is the same as telling them that all questions have already been asked, once and for all. It is to tell them that to solve their problems, all they and future generations have to do is dip into the grab-bag of scientific solutions invented in and for the countries of the North.

The question arises whether all societies must pass through this process of so-called development? In other words, is it really desirable for the whole world to become an industrial civilization? Why shouldn't we have the right or, dare I say, the duty to follow our own path and even to distinguish science from progress, development from Westernization — concepts that have been intentionally conflated. Are we really unable to escape the perpetual human urge to dominate through the power of the intellect?

To build a coherent, development-oriented economy, we must rely on the work of ethnologists who are able to describe both industrial and traditional societies. Western logic, based on objective knowledge and essentially materialist, is in direct opposition to the mythical way of

thinking found in nonindustrial societies.

There is an enormous psychological cost to modernization. Advanced technologies, imported without question into the new nations of the Third World, can do more bad than good. Why?

To begin with, Western technology has been designed in light of the many resources available in the rich countries: financial capital, workers with specialized skills, raw materials, energy, and so on. As such it is not directly transferable to poor countries where money and energy are scarce and human resources are abundant. The social, economic, and cultural interests of Third World countries are often directly opposed to those of the rich nations.

Secondly, when an ultramodern factory is sold "ready for operation" to an underdeveloped country, chances are it will be built in an urban area and create jobs there, rather than in the rural areas where the need is greatest and the weight of poverty most onerous.

Finally, large foreign industries recruit their managers and technical staff from among the 5 to 10 percent of the population that makes up the local elite. And it is these same people who end up reaping the benefits of their activities. Thus the vast majority of the population is ignored and will never benefit from the presence of a new high-tech industry in their area.

It is clear that the industrialization model adopted by most developing countries has only accentuated the gap between rich and poor. It almost always reinforces the societal schism whereby 5 to 10 percent of the people form the elite — industrialists, businessmen, large land-

owners, politicians, bureaucrats, doctors, engineers, technicians and so on — and far behind trails the other 90 to 95 percent of the population, the poor peasants, half of whom live below the poverty line.

Technology is like genetic material — it is encoded with the characteristics of the society which developed it, and it tries to reproduce that society if the economic, social, and political environment is compatible with it and malleable. In short, elitist, capitalist societies that export high technology will reproduce elitist, capitalist structures in the importing countries.

To understand this phenomenon, one simply has to look at the mechanisms of technology transfer: provision of massive amounts of capital or financial aid by the exporting countries; knowledge transfer through technical experts; and training of student apprentices from the underdeveloped countries in institutions in the industrialized countries. Even if the injection of foreign capital doesn't directly modify the social structures of the importing country, it nevertheless comes with political strings attached.

The presence of experts from the industrialized countries goes a long way to transferring Western values to the host Third World countries. Scientifically and technically superior, the expatriate experts set up laboratories, work sites, and research centres very similar to the ones they left behind at home. And because in the eyes of their Third World counterparts these expatriates are founts of knowledge, they become models to be emulated. Their lifestyle and way of thinking are copied, clearly to

the detriment of the host country's sociocultural values. The transfer of a foreign technology, then, automatically promotes the transfer of the foreign culture that invented the technology.

Finally, the training of Third World technicians and engineers in industrialized countries also promotes the introduction of Western structures. It is difficult for students to avoid being influenced by the lifestyle of the country in which they are studying. When they return home, they become, of necessity, part of the elite, that select group which follows the lifestyle most likely to perpetuate its position of privilege.

No matter how well intentioned the promoters of technical assistance may be, it is unthinkable that the Third World could pull together the necessary financial, human, and material resources that the technological enterprise demands. For the industrialized countries, it took centuries to build up such resources. Humanity's largest and most shameful programs of dehumanization have always carried noble labels — such as “the duty to civilize”, “development aid”, “technical assistance”, “new world humanitarian order”.

If the Third World finds itself unable to dispense with a borrowed identity, it will have no choice but to reject progress. Its happiness depends on its decision. It must decide on its own culture, joys, dreams, hopes, identity — its own future.

Having said that, we must recognize our duty to show that science is no more universal than the multitude of techniques and technologies that make it up. We must then choose those technologies which

help humanity to reconcile itself with nature rather than dominate it, and which help us to avoid the wasteful habits that consumer societies have forced on us.

We in the South have the potential to build an alternative to this carnivore called science which devours nature and feeds on people and life. We have the potential to create new ways of thinking and acting, ways which are wise and human. In our hands and heads, we hold humanity's best chances of survival.

Because of this I would like to shout out to the researchers, technicians, and engineers of the Third World: “My friends, it's your turn. Design your machines to suit us in the tropics!” I would also like to address my Northern colleagues working in the area of scientific and technical information — the librarians, archivists, documentalists, and consultants who are the main channel of development aid in the area of documentation. I would tell them that we in the South are convinced that it is no longer possible for us to develop according to the models of either the Western or Eastern countries.

Our past experience no longer allows us to confuse cooperation with subordination, bilateral exchanges with unequal exchanges. Our public libraries could henceforth have meaningful roles to play if we can just rid them of the imported frameworks under which they operate and have them become more responsive to the local populations' needs. They need to use the resources available to them to create adapted structures and tools.

New librarians should be trained to meet the needs of the young countries of the Third World. They should be able to compile pools of information pertinent to the interests of the citizenry. They should be able to teach reading and writing and prepare basic spelling books. They should be able to develop audiovisual materials on oral traditions. They should be able to write for children and adults and hold readings in libraries and public halls.

As for our school libraries, they would like to play the same role as their counterparts in Europe and North America. I refer here to

What is essential, though, is that we ensure that the new technologies are adapted to the needs and means of our countries, enabling development to happen from within. We must ensure that the transfer of technologies to the Third World is not tied to the creation of export markets for multinational companies.

There is nothing more disheartening than to see cemeteries of broken-down machines awaiting spare parts or repair by technicians from abroad. And when equipment breaks down every week because it isn't suited to the Third World environment, how distressing it is to have to call in experts from the

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university libraries, research libraries, and specialized scientific and technical libraries. Our academics and senior technical personnel need the same information as their counterparts in the industrialized countries. After all, science and technology now transcend all geographical boundaries. For this reason, new technologies are of great interest to us. We do not want to continue using outdated information; we want to tap the latest sources of information so that our researchers are in tune with the rest of the world.

company you've been forced to sign a service agreement with.

So, dear colleagues and partners of the North, if you truly wish to help us, give us the means to self-development. Always remember to take into account our particular circumstances and needs, and please do not impose your solutions on us. This is the price of harmonious cooperation between the libraries of the industrialized countries and those of the Third World. ■