



Creating Communication for Social Change: A Case Study of Alfonso Gumucio Dagnon

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Introduction

Theories of social change historically focus on how ideas change individuals rather than how individuals change ideas (Bornstein, 2004). More and more people are coming to acknowledge that the development work that has been done over the last 50 years has not significantly improved the lives of the vast majority of people in third world countries. There are increasing calls for a new way of doing development, one that recognizes the central role that local people need to play in defining their own needs and ensuring that they are met. Many individuals are steadfastly working to institute the social changes that would ensure the participation of local people in deciding what development means; one of these people is Alfonso Gumucio Dagnon. Through film, photography, short stories, poetry, essays, and research he advocates for a new grassroots based development model that varies to fit each local context.

The goals of development have shifted from a transfer of Western models of growth to working towards a worldwide restructuring of political and economic relationships for a more even distribution of benefits and power to all people. This redefinition involves creating new systems at all levels of society for coming to consensus and communicating personal and collective values around the meanings and desired processes of development. Based on the collective failures and frustrations of past development efforts, the field of Communication for Social and Environmental Change has begun to gain legitimacy as an essential area of study and practice.

During an interview at the University of Guelph in October 2004, Alfonso shared his views: “Something is wrong in development and I think [it is because] people are not participating in their own future, in their own decisions. I'm definitely in favor of another approach to development that really tries to involve communities- not individuals alone- but communities. The only way to do it is through another type of communication, which

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hasn't been really used by any of these big development organizations... I think that NGOs, communities themselves, and other organizations that are working at the grass roots level can [best implement this new kind of communication] (Gumucio Dagon, 2004b).”

But organizations and communities are made up of individuals and it is the dedication and perseverance of the people who champion communication for change that will determine how quickly and strongly a new vision for participatory development takes hold. Sociologists often study the macro-scale forces behind social changes; trends in demographics, markets, technology, political processes, and social values but they rarely look at how individuals can affect these dynamics. However, without the support of a spokesperson who will promote and market it, a good idea vary rarely gets adopted on a systemic level. It seems to be human nature to resist change especially if we feel forced to comply with an idea that will threaten our power, position, or image of ourselves. Because of this, the people who champion new ideas for social change must have the focus and determination to build a whole framework of social and economic support around their ideas (Bornstein, 2004).

Salvaging Popular Memory

Usually people do not become interested in social change in a flash of inspiration, they develop their ideas over years of reflection on personal experiences. Alfonso is no exception; his interest in communication was born out of both his professional training as well as his personal life experiences. He explains that growing up in Bolivia in the 1950s had a profound impact on his worldview, “From my childhood I was conscious about social issues because my father had been one of the main political figures in the Nationalist revolution in 1952. He was the soul of economic and social development and always inspired my views on social issues.”

Outside of his family, other events in the country also affected Alfonso’s values, “When Ché [Guevara] was killed in Bolivia by orders of the CIA, I was 17 years old. His death had an enormous impact in my entire generation. Many chose to [become] guerrillas or political militants. I chose to write and express myself independently, but with a firm conviction that social change was imperative in Bolivia (Gumucio Dagon, 2004a).”

As a child, Alfonso wanted to be a doctor, “but not for the body: for the soul.” He studied medicine for two years and then, despite pressure from his family to become a “professional,” he switched to literature. From there he began to write film critiques and cultivate an interest in filmmaking. When General Banzer took over Bolivia in a military coup in 1971, Alfonso left in exile to Europe. He first year studying film at the Faculty of Information Sciences in Madrid, Spain was spent mostly writing poetry, because “it was Franco’s Spain and not very interesting and [besides] there was not one good Spanish filmmaker teaching at the university (Gumucio Dagon, 2004b).”

The following year, without speaking a word of French he switched to one of the leading film school in Europe, the *Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques* (IDHEC),

where the emphasis was on production and the technical part of filmmaking rather than on the theory and meaning of film. At the same time he also enrolled in the *Universite de Vincennes*, which was created outside of Paris for dissenting students after May 1968. Alfonso recalls working with the editors of the magazines *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Cinethique* who were teaching there: “for me it was incredible, I was exposed to the most advanced thinking in terms of film and film criticism in the world. We were not doing much filming at Vincennes but we were really questioning the [whole] social purpose of cinema (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

For Alfonso, those reflections about the meaning of cinema center on what it means to be Bolivian, “I am from a country that has a 60% indigenous population, but I am a white person of Spanish descent. So what's my role in that society? I know it's one country but [it's shared by] several cultures. I think...the pain of having the country divided by the lack of dialogue between cultures has [strongly impacted] me (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

For his final project at university, Alfonso made a 75 minute black and white documentary film called *Senores Generales, Senores Coroneles* about Bolivia's history, focusing on the period of Banzer's military dictatorship between 1971 and 1978. He wrote the narration first and then began to look for images to illustrate it. The project became extremely challenging, as there is very little historical footage of Bolivia. Much of the film in fact was made with newspaper photographs, Alfonso explained during an interview in Mexico, “There are moments when the image seems very static- boring if you like- because I refused to compromise what I wanted to say for the sake of aesthetic variation (Burton, 1986).”

It is this feeling of needing to recapture history has informed much of Alfonso's work. He puts it this way: “What matters most to me in film is its capacity to salvage popular memory and to rewrite history in visual images from the perspective of the marginalized classes. In contrast to written history, which has always been filtered through the lens of privilege. The history books of my country do not tell the story of the Bolivian people, but of a series of individuals who enjoyed temporary residence in the Governmental Palace (Burton, 1986).”

One of the main problems with the lack of locally produced content in media, is that local versions of reality never get validated and reinforced. This ultimately serves to disempower people by fostering feelings of dependency, backwardness and inadequacy. Alfonso comments that the radio and television shows in Latin America are often brought in from outside of the region, “What you see is just some mirror image of what is said in the US, when I turn on the TV is Brazil or in Guatemala, [I find] the same US channels...The production in our own countries...is at it's lowest now because [stations] ... can fill their programming with things that are imported and are less expensive than investing in local production (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

While still in exile, Alfonso began to work with Jorge Sanjines, one of Bolivia's leading filmmakers. Together they created *Get out of Here*, a historical drama that challenged the

norms and boundaries of the role of cinema. The actors were local people who unscripted, reenacted their own history. Alfonso recalls the process: “the camera adapted itself to the actions of the *campesinos*, rather than the reverse. To direct historical actors as one would direct professional or conventional actors is to denaturalize them, to block all that their memory might spontaneously offer (Burton, 1986).”

During this same time, Alfonso also began working on two books to address the fact that there is little written history about Bolivia from a popular perspective. In 1974 he began the six-year project of writing *La Historia de Cine Boliviano* (The History of Bolivian Film), and from 1976 to 1978 he wrote a volume on the geography, culture and society of Bolivia for the *Le Seuil's Petite Planete* series.

During his second period of exile in Nicaragua in 1980, he wrote another book called *Workers' Cinema: Theoretical and Practical Support Manual for the Creation of Super-8 Film Workshops*, which made a case for changing the ownership of both media production and development processes. He describes it as, “a call to transform the entire filmmaking process- not just production, but also distribution, reception, feedback, everything through the transfer of technology. I don't believe that this transformation will be either quick or easy. These changes will take years to achieve. But I have made a commitment to this approach...[and] I think all great transformations hinge on subjective factors like commitment and conviction (Burton, 1986) .”

Choosing to Have an Impact

Alfonso's worldview is characterized by a strong sense of pragmatism and doing what needs to be done. His life has often taken unexpected turns, especially because of the political environment of Bolivia, and because of this, he appreciates both in himself and others, the ability to constantly learn in order to adapt to evolving environments.

The number of mediums in which Alfonso works and the sheer quantity of development issues that he has covered in his professional life are due to the simple desire to get things done. At heart he is a poet, “but of course, you cannot [make a living from] poetry in a country like Bolivia, which is why I studied filmmaking, which I also liked very much. However, there is no industry or support for filmmaking in Bolivia, and I'm very bad at fundraising, so I decided to alternate between books, films and other communication activities. (Gumucio Dagron, 2004a)”

Alfonso has watched other artists, including filmmaker Jorge Sanjines, spend years fundraising before they can do the work they love. Because of this Alfonso made the decision not to concentrate on feature length films but rather “to do smaller things that can have an impact immediately on the projects or people I'm working with and also [allow me to express] the things I have inside [of me] in terms of poetry and photography. That [has been] my choice (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

Unlike most filmmakers who strive to reach as many people as possible, Alfonso has also made a conscious decision about who he makes films for: “Any film that aims for an

audience of a million people must be highly generalized in both topic and language. I believe that if you want to address issues in depth, you need to make concrete films for specific groups [of people] (Burton, 1986).”

But even when the audience has been clearly defined, films don't always happen the way they are planned. After returning from his first period of exile in 1978, Alfonso started to work with the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (Bolivian Workers' Union). Several preparatory sessions were held to organize training for workers in photography and film, but “we never got to do them because the [García Meza] military coup came so I did this [later] in Nicaragua in fact. During the year that I spent there [1980], I worked with the *Central Sandinista de Trabajadores* [the Sandinista Workers' Union] and we did short films with young people who had never used cameras before (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

In 1985, after returning from exile for the second time, Alfonso created a new organization called CIMCA (The Center for Integration of Alternative Media) to work exclusively on communication for social change. He recalls, “we worked with rural communities- peasants but also miners and other groups [that were working on] human rights, union rights, women's issues.... But at the same time I had to finance this project because we didn't have much support. So I started doing international consultancy work with UN agencies. I would go for one month and work in Africa or Asia and then come back and put that money into the NGO. That is what opened me up to other topics like health, children's rights and the environment (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

Creating The Future

Alfonso is currently the Managing Director of the Communication for Social Change Consortium. This initiative grew out of a series of meetings starting in April 1997 that were called by Denise Grey-Felder, then head of the Rockefeller Foundation's Communications Office. The first meeting was organized around the simple question: what kind of communication for social change do we want in the next century? Alfonso remembers the reunion clearly: “We ended this 5-day meeting with a small one-page document saying: yes, we believe in communication that empowers people, that gives voices to the people, that is horizontal, etc. [We were] basically saying what many others had said in the fight against the big [media] conglomerates...But [it was more] interesting [this time] because the Rockefeller Foundation was funding the meeting (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

Alfonso remembers thinking that it was a good meeting but was convinced that it would be the last. Until he got several more calls from Denise for follow-up reunions, where they began “discussing things more in depth. At some point we started inviting people from other organizations: from the UN, the World Bank, and USAID to discuss these issues. [We began] to tell them: listen there is another option for communication that you might be interested in. And they were interested but of course they are big institutions that don't change very easily (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b).”

Out of these meetings two important ideas were born. The first was to document where and how experiences of communication for social change are already happening. In order to do this, Alfonso spent about one year traveling through Asia, Africa, and Latin America researching communication experiences that were well established at the grassroots level past the initial donor funding stage, managed by the community in all aspects, and that strengthened democratic values, culture, and peace. The result was the book *Making Waves*, which profiles 50 such communication experiences that use different media; radio, video, interpersonal, the internet and theatre (Gumucio Dagon, 2001).

The second idea was to look more closely at why communication for social change isn't being adopted faster by large development organizations. Alfonso recounts one of the meetings where he said, "the problem is that there's no communicators as such, there's [a lot of] journalists in this world but [few] communicators (Gumucio Dagon, 2004b)." This resulted in Alfonso embarking on another tour, this time to search for university departments that train people in communication for social change. He discovered that out of the 2500 or so communication departments in the world, only 5 or 6 actually teach communication for social change, which explains why development organizations often find only journalists when they search for communication specialists.

The Rockefeller group began to brainstorm about how to address this problem. First "we started thinking about the profile of the communicator that was needed ...[then] we defined the role of the communicator and [finally] designed an outline of a master's degree in communication for social change [that could train them] (Gumucio Dagon, 2004b)."

Around this time, Denise Grey-Felder, resigned from the Foundation and invited Alfonso to help found the Communication for Social Change Consortium. Alfonso recalls his reaction: "I thought it was ideal for me because the same ideas that we are now trying to implement, I'd been writing on [since] the mid-seventies and early eighties. To have an institution that has these ideas as a policy platform, is a very good opportunity for me. As long as it lasts, I'll be there (Gumucio Dagon, 2004b)."

According to Denise, the importance of communication for social change lies in its ability to get to "the heart of where the knowledge lies...People have what they need...in terms of basic intelligence and capability... in just about any community on earth. What they can use help with is additional information, additional resources, additional skills. So for me, the community has to rule. Because if you are ever going to sustain any change it has to start where people live and work and die (The Communication Initiative, 2004)."

Under the umbrella of the Consortium, Alfonso continues to work on addressing the lack of trained communication for social change practitioners. He comments, "we are trying to work with universities, at least one in Latin America, one in Africa, and one in Asia to implement this master's degree on communication for social change. With the hope that in 2 to 4 years [they will have trained] new communicators with a high level of strategic

thinking. The status [conferred by the master's degree] will allow them to talk with managers of projects and decision makers and really have a say on what kind of communication is used in projects (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b)."

The Consortium is currently working on two related projects, both of them designed to help establish communication for social change as a legitimate field of study and practice. The first is a fully searchable on-line database of texts written on communication for social change, this *Body of Knowledge* contains more than 2000 entries. The other is an anthology, "We've been working for the past two years in selecting 100 texts or parts of texts [written by] experts, that really trace the evolution of the thinking about communication for social change from the 1960s to now (Gumucio Dagron, 2004b)."

Conclusion

Alfonso has been steadily working with others for about thirty years to institutionalize the empowerment of people in their own development through changes in the communication culture within universities, donor organizations, individual development practitioners, and communities themselves. Of his inspiration, Alfonso says, "I cannot be indifferent to the persistent popular demand for means for bearing witness, of reconstructing the past and transmitting the present (Burton, 1986)."

His work proves not only that individuals can make a difference but that, "Imperfect, difficult to label, culturally diverse, and often escaping from institutional control, participatory communication is feeding a new approach to communication and to development as well. Participatory communication is fragile, it is often contradictory, which conspires against the ready to replicate models, but in the end it is as alive as the communities that use it to promote dialogue and networking on issues that are important for community life: development, yes, but also culture, power and democracy (Gumucio Dagron, 2003)."

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