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Transformative Communication in Development Organisation: Strategic Engagement and Celebrity Influence

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This essay uncovers the evolving paradigm of communication for development, then with a focus on the strategic engagement of celebrity influence. Contextualised against the historical dominance of the Euro-Americentric modernisation discourse and with the multi-step communication framework, it situates celebrity engagement within a bidirectional model of information diffusion and participatory advocacy. The essay integrates the theoretical perspective with illustrative case studies to articulate the interplay between emotional resonance, mediated narratives, and public mobilisation. The findings reveal both the potential of celebrity influence to amplify development initiatives and the challenges posed by sensationalism and skepticism. Ultimately, it advances a call for strategic alignment between academic inquiry and institutional praxis, advocating for the positive celebrity influence to achieve cogent policy change in international development.

In order to facilitate well-coordinated policy change, communication is of vital importance within development praxis. International development organisations (IDOs) increasingly engage in communication to gain support and convince public opinion of moral and interest reasons (Chapman and Fisher, 2000; Xu, 2024). Communication for development (C4D) is crucial in conveying information and evoking empathy, guided by principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independency (OCHA, 2012). Quebral (2002) defines C4D as the art and science of human interaction for designed transformation and development. Ensuring an informed, empathetic public, C4D activates human agency to enhance the diffusion of

policy advocacy in development. Enhanced diffusion means more material donation and spiritual sympathy, which engenders a heartfelt recognition of the necessity and urgency of policy change, evoking empathy and translating into tangible contributions. With the impact of mobile internet and social media, IDOs frequently leverage celebrities in C4D praxis. The multi-step communication suggests that diffusion occurs when media first reaches opinion leaders, who interpret and filter before passing information on to their followers (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1964; Hilbert *et al.*, 2017). Whether interpreting information or evoking emotion, the celebrities trusted by the public possess the potential for bidirectionally mediating top-down information and bottom-up participation. For IDOs, celebrity implies a popular figure whose presence earns material benefits (Turner, 2004, 2010; Brockington, 2014, pp. 90–91). Concisely, this essay revisits the C4D theoretical framework and elucidates its impact on development cooperation; moreover, it considers celebrity influence as a solution in policy advocacy. Regarding inclusive internet and social media, despite skepticism about celebrity stances, IDOs ought to maximise celebrity C4D to advocate public perception for effective development policy change.

C4D is the balanced art and science of human communication (Quebral, 2002, p. 16). However, before the decades-long reconciliation, the initial role of C4D might partially imply imbalanced inculcation and indoctrination (Manyozo, 2006), which is a strong assessment but makes sense with Manyozo's argument. Based on the US Post-World War II experience of international assistance, preliminary findings from the US argued C4D as a direct, potent multiplier to accelerate and amplify development benefits (Lerner, 1958; Rogers, 1962; Schramm, 1964; Servaes, 2000). The Bretton Woods School in the US dominated the C4D studies before 1976 (Roman, 2005; Manyozo, 2006). According to this school, the media indoctrinated the paradigmatic US-centric perception of modernisation and modernity to recipient communities (Hulme & Turner, 1990, p. 34) by inculcating political and economic education (Braman, Shah and Fair, 2001, p. 173). Lerner (1958) demonstrated the impact of C4D on top-down intervention. In praxis, within 30 years following 1949, IDOs represented Euro-American officially-backed institutions, deploying C4D to indoctrinate the Global

South populace to embrace everything named the West's modernity (Golding, 1974; Shah, 2020).

Back then, the two-step flow of communication spotlighted individual influence as an intermediary mechanism (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948; Shah, 2011, p. 162). IDOs inculcated a modernisation paradigm in the public, inevitably through the first step—the opinion leaders who interpreted information. Rogers (1962, p. 219) portrayed opinion leaders as more internationalised with higher status and exposure. The second step occurs when celebrated intermediaries use their influence to convey information to followers. Due to the one-way influence, this two-step mechanism features similar to missionaries (Stirrat, 2000). Naturally, development studies have criticised the two-step flow since it recently seems one-sided and exaggerated. Yet, it was a regular strategy during the Cold War, and gradually adjusted towards multi-step C4D.

The two-step C4D was predominant in Cold War diplomacy with hidden hubris of Euro-Americentrism. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) conducted modernisation initiatives in the Third World through agricultural diplomacy to diffuse and indoctrinate the US paradigm (Ferguson, 1994; McGlade, 2009). For example, to facilitate Nigeria's agricultural modernisation, USAID implemented education initiatives to develop agricultural faculties at Nigerian institutions in 1960 (Johnson and Okigbo, 1989). These institutions covered the agricultural faculties at the University of Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University, the University of Ife, and a research station at Umudike (p. 1212). In 1967, USAID funded Nigeria's International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (USAID, 2013). The two-step flow guided USAID to inculcate university faculties and communicate with existing experts in agriculture. This inculcation was the first step of the two-step C4D wherein US IDOs conveyed the modernisation paradigm to opinion leaders. The experts wielded prestige in Nigeria's agriculture; hence, their assistance in diffusion was conducive to the US-centric propaganda of modernisation. USAID also inculcated students with agricultural expertise and technology, indoctrinating more opinion leaders via knowledge empowerment. Nowadays, the universities are Nigeria's most prestigious institutions for educating agricultural experts

and technocrats. Therefore, this C4D with existing and potential opinion leaders indoctrinates the paradigmatic modernisation, with their first step reaching faculties and students as vital intermediaries—USAID inculcated agricultural knowledge while subtly hiding political propaganda behind education and assistance (Ferguson, 1994).

However, the hidden propaganda with Euro-Americentric hubris triggered tensions and setbacks for the second step. Due to domestic politics, local experts and opinion leaders attempted to adjust IDOs' faculty development policy (Johnson and Okigbo, 1989). Whereas USAID disregarded their opinions, thus local authorities proclaimed disagreement—incurring the closure of departments and colleges (p. 1213). Ultimately, tormented by conflicting opinions, the inculcation of Nigeria's agricultural faculties fell flat (p. 1217)—symbolising the failure of unidirectional indoctrination. The hubris of modernisation-backed C4D trapped into the curse of knowledge, i.e., knowledgeable US experts hubristically reject to coordinate with Nigerian authorities. Essentially, they perceived intermediaries merely as a sounding board, and this hubris violated the two-step C4D mechanisms.

The hubristic rejection was not uncommon throughout the (Post-)Cold War. To correct this curse of Euro-Americentric knowledge, in recent 30 years, the international development realm has shifted away from the Bretton Woods paradigm of modernisation (Fair and Shah, 1997; Servaes, 2000). From 1987 to 1996, bottom-up participatory C4D, represented by Los Baños School, supplanted Bretton Woods School as the mainstream (Jamias, 1975; Fair and Shah, 1997; Fair, 1989; Roman, 2005). This mainstream made the impact of C4D indirect and complementary, incorporating a range of concepts such as cultural integration, imagined communities, and civil society organisations (Braman, Shah and Fair, 2001, pp. 176–178; Shah, 2011, 2020). The historical dominance of the Euro-American paradigms in C4D, as evidenced during the Cold War, illustrates the risk of top-down indoctrination. By contrast, the emergence of multi-step communication underscores the relevance of intermediaries, such as celebrities, in fostering more inclusive bidirectional dialogue and participatory engagement within development policy.

Bretton Woods School gradually recognised the two-way C4D, as listening and

learning could resolve the curse of hubris. Then, multi-step flow of communication emerged (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1964), wherein intermediaries convey the bottom-up mediation. Diffusion through intermediary opinion leaders substituted one-way indoctrination. Since then, IDOs focused on listening to the public to achieve consensus without previous hubris. Consequently, C4D broke the knowledge curse, expanding its significance based on public cooperation. The cooperation necessitated the obligation of opinion leaders to not only interpret information but also mediate consensus (Jamias, 1975; Quebral, 1988). Following consensus, C4D must obey humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (OCHA, 2012). Humanity is the consensus of all IDO affairs, requiring themselves and opinion leaders to be neutral and impartial. Neutrality makes resource allocation meet the needs of the majority. Impartiality demands IDOs to remain free from politics, military, business, or other manipulations. The four principles dismantle the foundation of the knowledge curse and reinforce the relevance of multi-step C4D (Hilbert *et al.*, 2017).

The principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence underscore bidirectional listening to dismantle the Euro-Americentric indoctrination. The bidirectional, multi-step C4D relies on intermediaries to pierce audiences. Succinctly, it necessitates accurate information and piercing empathy conveyed by opinion leaders. For instance, the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), an IDO network comprising fifteen leading UK humanitarian agencies, endeavours to raise donations and save lives. Charitable IDOs and humanitarian practitioners act as opinion leaders in facilitating two-way C4D. Regarding the Turkey-Syria Earthquake, the DEC tailored different C4D approaches for diverse audiences, including dramatic narratives and real-life interviews (DEC, 2023). Narrative videos, *The Locker*, conveyed piercing stories of earthquake survivors to evoke sympathy. To supplement information, real interviews with survivors (DEC, 2024) offered authentic records, enhancing the persuasiveness of video stories. DEC's C4D appeared to adhere to the principles outlined. Nevertheless, the public questioned the impact of donations, particularly concerning the transparency and accountability of IDO operations. Shortly, while participatory C4D in humanitarian sectors could effectively evoke emotions, the challenge remains in the public

perception of accurate information. In summary, since both top-down and bottom-up C4D require enhancement, academia and IDOs ought to contemplate the crux of challenges and innovative solutions to dismantle the crux.

Perception of information delivers challenges, as evidenced by DEC. However, the crux of challenges derives not from information accuracy but perception enhancement because communication inherently features subjective (Fiske, 2002; Hall, 2007). This subjectivity prompts skepticism of top-down and bottom-up C4D. To handle the perceptual skepticism, leveraging celebrities trusted by the public as intermediary opinion leaders of multi-step C4D emerges as an innovative strategy. The mechanisms through which celebrities enhance C4D outcomes rely on their ability to evoke emotional resonance, leverage vast social media networks, and frame developmental narratives in relatable ways. For example, Emma Watson's HeForShe campaign effectively mobilised global audiences by integrating social media advocacy with emotional storytelling and calls to action. This resulted in over 1.3 billion online engagements and commitments from global leaders. Similarly, celebrity initiatives can amplify fundraising efforts by personalising stories of those impacted by crises, transforming abstract statistics into compelling narratives that drive public participation. The mechanisms highlight the tangible outcomes celebrities can achieve when aligned with development goals, including increased donations, policy shifts, and heightened public awareness.

Additionally, for IDOs, celebrity implies a public presence whose appearance earns benefits (Turner, 2004, 2010; Brockington, 2014). With expanding media industries and mobile internet connections, this essay considers celebrity C4D as bidirectionally beneficial to official and public discourse. Previously, official media propagated the very top-down indoctrination, opposed by the bottom-up public. The absence of influential intermediaries yielded minimal bidirectional listening. A turning point has arisen as celebrities in the multi-step C4D mediate disagreements among the public and authorities (Lewis *et al.*, 2008; Goodman, 2010). Celebrities act not only as mediators for IDOs in relatively top-down C4D but also to foster public consensus, buoyed by individual influence.

A journalist's perspective challenged Brockington (2015) with an assertion that, to some extent, the British public, regardless of age, gender, or other demographics, all desire to know celebrities. Thereby, the celebrities of strong interest foster their positive role in C4D affairs (Brockington, 2014, pp. 88–89). Despite criticisms questioning celebrities' stances, this essay argues for celebrities as opinion leaders in C4D, but excessive debates over their stance rationality might miss the potential solutions brought by celebrity influence (Fletcher, 2015; Christiansen and Richey, 2015). In other words, the proof of the pudding is in the eating—an engaging idiom implying the real-world tangible benefits of celebrity influence. Brockington (2014, p. 91) highlights the outcomes and mechanisms of celebrity influence in C4D, instead of excessively criticising their personal lives. Whence, Christiansen and Richey (2015) attempt to dismantle Eurocentric interpretations of celebrities in such a case that elucidates the mechanisms and outcomes of C4D between IDOs and races, transcending the narratives of individual stories (pp. 505, 514). Available research also elaborates on the political economy of celebrity C4D. This elaboration reveals intermediary mechanisms of celebrity C4D, along with a multi-step structure in the celebrity–charity–corporate (Brockington, 2014) and celebrity–consumption–compassion complexes (Goodman and Barnes, 2011). Additionally, closer to the lives of celebrities, scrutiny explores social relations for long-run partnerships, wherein IDOs inform celebrities and the public about fundraising outcomes and fund utilisation (Leibovitz, 2007; De Waal, 2008; Flint and De Waal, 2008). These studies lay a pragmatic framework of causality and mechanisms for celebrity influence, unpack how they function as opinion leaders of multi-step flow, and construct the theoretical foundation for subsequent interpretation of celebrity C4D evidence.

Oxfam's celebrity C4D ambassadors span various generations, featuring superstars such as Paul McCartney, Leonardo DiCaprio, Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift, David Beckham, and Scarlett Johansson (Oxfam, 2024). For example, in response to the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, acclaimed actress Scarlett Johansson designed a handbag to support Oxfam in fundraising for disaster relief. Profits from the global sales of the bag were pledged to Oxfam's programme in Haiti (Oxfam, 2010). Johansson intended to 'promote conscious consumerism', support

Oxfam's Haiti Earthquake Response Fund, and rally consumers for life-saving assistance. While Johansson's initiative showcased the potential of celebrity-driven fundraising, it also highlights the limitations of such campaigns. Critics, however, highlighted the shortcomings of this top-down celebrity C4D, with concerns over whether partial donations adequately addressed the scale of the disaster. The initiative lacked sufficient transparency. According to Dusil (2010), it is interesting that 'part of the profits will be donated', as "it is kind of silly, the bag probably will not be expensive... Donating all profits would matter." By contrast, figures like Bono, whose long-term advocacy for debt relief and AIDS awareness involved consistent collaboration with international organisations and governments, offer a model of sustained celebrity engagement with tangible systemic impact. For instance, Bono's work mobilised billions in aid to Africa, highlighting the efficacy of structured, transparent, and sustained celebrity-driven campaigns.

Furthermore, bottom-up mediation is also subject to controversy. Michael Jackson, a very well-known pop music icon, dedicated much of his career to impartial humanitarian work (Bennett, 2010). Jackson's dedication implied that he mediated the interests of vulnerable groups related to AIDS, cancer, child welfare, and famine. In 2000, the Guinness World Records recognised Jackson as the pop music star who supported the most charitable organisations (Van den Bulck and Panis, 2010). But, his personal life raised doubts among the public about whether he could truly represent the groups. Van den Bulck and Panis (2010) dissect that although Jackson was eventually cleared of accusations, the public would never cease to question his stance on humanitarian dedication. While a celebrity could engage simultaneously in the bidirectional C4D, the case studies on Johansson and Jackson illustrate that controversies over stances and motives plague celebrities' contributions to C4D, whether top-down or bottom-up.

The questioning of celebrity stances persists. The means to celebrity status and their motives for philanthropy are under scrutiny—their stances might be unstable and feeble, susceptible to business and political manipulation (Meyer and Gamson, 1995; Biccum, 2007; Brockington, 2008; Yrjölä, 2009). Kapoor (2012) radically states that celebrities actually

exacerbate inequality, as philanthropy is merely a means to elevate their status. Cameron and Haanstra (2008) and Chouliaraki (2012) criticise that celebrity C4D narrowly focuses the attention of the Northern public on the North itself, rather than the structural reasons for Global South's poverty and inequality. Critiques of celebrity stances constrain the potential of celebrity C4D; this essay counterargues that such constraint is detrimental. The celebrities wield influence, along with their fans, spanning continents. If there is insufficient evidence to prove their stances motivated by private profits—essentially hard to prove—it is believed that their mobilisation of vast fan support for C4D is positive.

This positivity stems from contrast. Before celebrity engagement in C4D affairs, many IDOs depicted Southern populations as helpless, passive victims using images of hungry, weak dark-skinned children (Wade and Grunsell, 1995; Rosario, 2003; Plewes and Stewart, 2006, p. 30; Cameron and Haanstra, 2008, p. 1477). Such biased portrayals framed the Global South as waiting for rescue, while the North elevated to the apostles/angels (Cameron and Haanstra, 2008, pp. 1479–1485). Fortunately, celebrity C4D has shaped a narrative of 'sexy development' to avoid the aforementioned North-centric hubris (*ibid.*, p. 1475). Nonetheless, sexy development is fragile. When social media amplifies scandals or accusations regarding a celebrity's personal life, it exponentially magnifies the negative aspects of celebrity influence (Bardocz-Bencsik, Begović and Dóczy, 2021). Although IDOs disclosing celebrities' firsthand fieldwork in development stories can enhance the authenticity and expertise of celebrities C4D (Goodman and Barnes, 2011)—essentially improving public perception—peering into celebrities' lives might amplify the negativity of celebrity influence disproportionately (Fletcher, 2015).

In other words, to effectively leverage the celebrity influence in C4D, academia ought to investigate and document the specific mechanisms through which celebrities contribute to humanitarian and developmental causes. By doing so, it will enable celebrities to channel more of their public persona and personal lives towards independent, influential humanitarian C4D initiatives. To counteract media's preoccupation with sensationalism, IDOs ought to prioritise storytelling that highlights celebrities' on-ground contributions and align the

narratives with development goals. Transparent reporting and firsthand documentation of celebrity involvement in development policy change can reinforce public trust and redirect media attention away from sensationalising their lives of personal controversy to systemic change that instead amplifies their influence in social development. Consequently, these narratives serve as valuable case studies and material for academic research, highlighting the interplay between celebrity influence and strategic engagement of development policy.

In conclusion, C4D plays a role in coordinating development policy change. Through strategic engagement leveraging celebrity influence, IDOs can enhance the diffusion of policy advocacy and garner support from the public. By embracing the innovative strategy of celebrity C4D based on multi-step communication, IDOs will facilitate empathy, mobilise resources, and empower communities to proactively contribute to international development affairs. Ultimately, leveraging the celebrity influence within a strategic, transparent, and participatory framework can redefine the C4D trajectory. Future research must codify best praxes and conquer challenges such as media sensationalism and skepticism towards celebrity motives, so as to integrate humanitarian principles for positive, inclusive, and impactful social change.

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