

# Decolonizing Development Communications: Examining the legacy of colonial communication practices and their impact on current development narratives

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## Abstract

This paper examines how colonial communication practices continue to shape global development narratives, even after formal independence. Colonial influences remain embedded in legal, educational, and media systems, perpetuating mental and cultural domination that benefits external interests. Using postcolonial and decolonial theories, including those of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the paper critiques the 1950s modernization paradigm, which positioned Western models as the universal standard and marginalized the Global South as perpetually deficient. The analysis highlights how "linguistic colonization" and the concept of "Othering" have fossilized an "us and them" dichotomy, in which Western-led development communication often marginalizes indigenous knowledge and silences the subaltern. By examining the role of language, the research illustrates how the continued dominance of European languages in African media and governance limits access to information and creates an internalized sense of inferiority among indigenous communities. Furthermore, the study critiques the "white gaze of development," noting that institutional hierarchies in global organizations often exclude those with lived experience, instead favoring top-down, directive communication models inherited from colonial regimes. To dismantle these colonial residues, the paper advocates for a shift from decolonization (a political process) to decoloniality, which seeks to transform knowledge production and culture. The proposed framework emphasizes Human-Centered Design (HCD), the elevation of indigenous languages, and participatory, community-led communication models that empower beneficiaries as co-creators of their own development. Ultimately, this research argues that meaningful progress is only attainable when development is defined and articulated by the people it seeks to serve, reimagining Africa not as a problem to be solved, but as a powerhouse of innovation and cultural wealth.

**Keywords:** Decoloniality, Development Communication, Linguistic Colonization, Othering, Participatory Communication, Subaltern, Human-Centered Design.

## Introduction

The concept of colonialism has been widely discussed in recent years. Colonialism is the maintenance of political, social, economic, and cultural domination over people by a foreign power for an extended period (W. Bell, 1991). In Africa, colonization popularly known as-the "Scramble for Africa"-officially began after the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885. This conference formalized the partitioning of Africa among European powers, accelerating colonial occupation. On the other hand, Portugal and Spain had already started establishing colonies along African coasts as early as the 15th century. Later African scholars would expound on the colonization process terming it as the process by which a foreign power controls a people, not just politically and economically but also mentally and culturally, through language, education, and institutions (Ngugi wa Thiongo, 1986) and an attempt to impose foreign systems on Africa, destroying our economic, political, and social institutions while replacing them with structures that served external interests (Julius Nyerere). With growing awareness of self-rule, African countries like Kenya fought battles for freedom from colonial rule. Colonial governments, most notably Britain, France and Portugal, made little effort to prepare their colonies for independence and instead tried to modernize and eventually absorb them. Still, the struggle for independence persisted and many African countries would retain self-governance in the decades that followed. With the departure of the colonisers, remnants of their rule were apparent in the colonies' legal, educational, political, security, health, communication and media systems, some of which remain today.

This paper critically examines how colonial communication practices continue to influence and impact development narratives, highlighting the theoretical perspectives, role of language and the continuing

dominance of Western standards and ideologies in development communication while advocating for participation, diversity, inclusivity and self-determination approaches to development and communication.

### **Defining Development Communication**

At the outset, it is necessary to introduce the concept of development. While communication existed way before colonization especially delivering a phatic function, the 1940s would see the establishment of non-governmental institutions with great significance in development post-colonization. Colonization had a before and an after especially for African nations, it opened a new frontier of modernity, where colonized nations were defined as lower and needing help i.e. development and the Western nations as more successful and capable of transforming the rest.

Traditionally, development had focused on the increase in income as the main source of well-being of individuals and hence the sole index of development. This continued till the 1980's, when Amartya Sen showed us that there are a wide range of deprivations of individuals and hence of nations in health, education and living standards, which cannot be captured by income alone. Later the concepts of participation, human-centeredness, empowerment and suitability were introduced mostly expounding that a nation's overall success was not based on the economic matrix alone.

Development communication refers to the strategic use of communication tools and methodologies to promote social development. Still, we must be aware of intention while advocating for development The Western model of development and the so-called aid programmes are mere political weapons that suit Western commercial interests, destroy domestic economies, impoverish the vast majority and further push borrowing nations into the abyss of debt.

### **Development Communication Historical Perspective**

The traditional approach to development communication was rooted in modernization theories of the 1950s, which suggested that development could be achieved by replicating the Western model (Rostow, 1960; Lerner, 1958). Communication in this season was mostly used to showcase the gaps in colonized nations and the deep desire for intervention to deliver transformation. This framework viewed media as a tool to "educate" and "modernize" societies, often employing a top-down, one-way communication model. Here development communication work included creating awareness of needs and showcasing the Western development partners' work in delivering said needs.

However, alternative theories emerged, challenging this approach especially because the awareness of development gaps also created a dependency on the part of the colonized. Dependency theory (Prebisch, 1964; Gunder Frank, 1967) exposed how global economic structures kept developing countries dependent on the West. Dependency theorists received a lot of criticism and were seen as complaining about required help coming to their nations. In the realm of development communication, this critique shifted the focus to empowering local voices and exposing exploitation in communities that were recipients of aid. Growth-with-equity theories (Sen, 1979) and participatory communication models emphasized two-way dialogue, acknowledging the importance of indigenous knowledge and local agency in development processes would be crucial to a shared transformation.

However, later postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said (1978), Achille Mbembe (2001), and Frantz Fanon (1961) further critiqued Western-dominated development paradigms. Said's concept of "othering" explained how colonial narratives constructed non-Western societies as inferior, reinforcing a dependency on Western intervention. The West was in charge of creating opportunities for intervention while delivering the said intervention. Fanon highlighted the psychological impact of colonialism, arguing that colonial rule operated not only through economic exploitation but also through cultural and linguistic domination whose effects would be experienced across religion, economy and culture. Post 2000s development communication would change into a more humanistic nature, pushed by a globalized connected world that pushed communities to own their voices and platforms including those that speak on development and media. In the 21st century, digital media has

emerged as a powerful catalyst for development communication, fundamentally altering how information is created or produced, disseminated, received, and acted upon in communities worldwide.

### **The Role of Language in Colonial and Postcolonial Communication**

It is no coincidence that Frantz Fanon (1967) started his work *Black Skin, White Masks* by talking about language. Having experienced what it means to be left voiceless, he immediately learnt that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other". The fundamental role of language in the development of human identity has been sufficiently documented. The human being cannot exist without communicating, eliminating the possibility of communication from the human spirit entails removing its humanity. Stuart Hall (1997) defined the process of meaning-making as the interaction of two different 'systems of representation.' One system connects 'things,' which includes people, objects, events, abstract ideas, and so on, with concepts, and the other system relates our conceptual maps with language. The main implication of this argument is that meaning is continuously negotiated, and every object in the world is always being-or at least is subject to being- redefined or relocated according to our cultural conceptual maps.

Knowing potential influence, Language was one of the most potent tools of colonial control. Colonizers imposed European languages as the mediums of governance, education, and media, while indigenous languages were marginalized. (Ngugi wa Thiong'o,1986) describes this as "linguistic colonization," wherein African languages were suppressed, and European languages became synonymous with progress and intelligence and so the colonized were even ashamed to use their language in communication. This resulted in an internalized sense of inferiority among colonized peoples, reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

Post-independence development communication policies largely maintained these colonial legacies and you will see that most local international development communication professionals are usually European. These positions are reserved for them. Even today, the dominance of English, French, and Portuguese in African media and education limits access to information for many Indigenous communities, further a lot of our productions are done in foreign languages meaning is lost in translation eventually erasing some of our contexts that cannot be translated. Rwanda's recent push to prioritize Kinyarwanda in national discourse represents a critical step towards linguistic decolonization, emphasizing the importance of language in shaping national identity and self-determination.

### **Colonial Media Strategies and Their Impact on Development Communication**

After the Berlin Conference (1885), colonialism penetrated African societies, imposing a new kind of communication and a new mentality. A conative, directive approach was then necessary to be sure that indigenous people obeyed the orders of the various colonial governments. This transformation meant, as a direct consequence, that communication was used in different manners, among which it is possible to distinguish the following three as being the most significant, as a means for political and social control; As a means for creating ethnocultural unity among indigenous people, as a means for looking down on Indigenous people, provoking a fall in their self-esteem and proposing western values as the main points of reference.

Colonial governments tightly controlled media (own and local), using it as a propaganda tool to maintain power. Censorship, surveillance, and disinformation were common strategies mostly delivered in formal and informal means (Local leaders emerged as key influencers). Print media, radio broadcasts, and educational curricula were designed to reinforce colonial ideologies and suppress dissent by introducing a new language and a new way of living. For example, in Kenya, colonial authorities censored anti-colonial publications while promoting loyalty to the British Empire through state-run newspapers.

Post-independence African governments and institutions often inherited and continued these top-down communication models. Political elites controlled national media, limiting public participation in governance and development discussions. The persistence of this centralized approach in many African countries highlights the need for a shift towards participatory and community-led communication models.

## Impacts of Colonization on Development Narratives

Colonization has had a profound impact on development narratives, just as it did on many institutions, structures and cultures shaping how societies perceive themselves, history, progress, society, communication and even their future aspirations. A key consequence is the concept of Othering, as coined by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Colonization defined the South and the North structures and references of the world, especially separating and dividing it into two of the better and the needy, portraying the colonized as inferior, exotic, savage and uncivilized, constructing binary oppositions such as civilized versus third/ developing world and rational versus irrational. These narratives marginalized non-Western cultures and continue to persist today, influencing the way development programs are designed and communicated. Many initiatives are framed as efforts to "develop the undeveloped," reinforcing historical hierarchies rather than acknowledging indigenous systems of knowledge and progress that are currently being experienced across. Also, the othering assumes homogeneity among the 'others' ignoring unique perspectives and lived experiences in different groups of people. Generalizations about appealing to the 'Global South' homogenizes complexities and the diversity between people. We cannot account for every detail, but framing the world in absolutes can fossilize divides between 'North' and 'South,' creating an "us and them" dichotomy which in effect discouraging the development that we claim to be in pursuit of.

The displacement of people due to conflict, movement for economic advantage, colonialism, slavery, and cultural hardship further shaped global identities through what is known as the Diaspora. (Gilroy 1993), discusses how the movement of African and Caribbean communities led to the formation of hybrid identities that transcend national boundaries. While diasporic communities have maintained cultural ties and influenced global music, literature, and activism, the migration of skilled professionals from the Global South to the West also reinforces Western superiority. Many returnees who work in development communication find themselves heavily influenced by Western frameworks, shaping the narratives they promote about Africa and its development. Development communication continues to miss out on the diversities that are delivered by the hybrid communities.

Postcolonialism has also introduced the concepts of Hybridity and Mimicry, as articulated by Homi Bhabha. Hybridity describes the blending of colonizer and colonized cultures, resulting in new, mixed identities, while mimicry refers to the act of imitating colonial culture, sometimes as a subtle form of resistance. One of the clearest examples is the continued dominance of European languages in African societies. Writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonizing the Mind*, have argued that while Africans may use English or French to communicate, they do so in ways that express indigenous worldviews. However, the reality remains that proficiency in Western languages determines access to global opportunities, with professionals in East Africa, for example, missing out on roles due to a lack of French fluency. Most of development communication roles still quote foreign languages as a requirement for hiring, even if some of these placements are in Africa.

A similar duality exists in Double Consciousness, a concept introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). It refers to the internal conflict faced by those who see themselves through both their cultural lens and the gaze of the dominant, colonial culture. Many Africans today navigate this dual identity, adopting Western values while remaining deeply connected to their indigenous roots. However, this balancing act often leads to a loss of cultural authenticity, as individuals feel pressured to conform to external expectations while struggling to preserve their heritage. This duality also impacts how we communicate about ourselves and our identities.

The suppression of indigenous voices is another critical consequence of colonialism especially locking out by way of language, captured by the concept of the Subaltern. Originally introduced by Antonio Gramsci and later expanded by (Spivak ,1999), the term refers to marginalized voices that are excluded from dominant historical and political narratives. Colonialism erased many indigenous histories and oral traditions, replacing them with records that served colonial interests. Even today, development communication often relies on Western perspectives, leading to misrepresentations of African societies. Many museums and historical archives still depict Africa through a colonial lens, reinforcing outdated narratives that fail to acknowledge the continent's rich intellectual and cultural heritage. Brand Kenya still utilizes colonial community and tribal representations,

and the same imagery is used by development communication leaders.

Similarly, colonialism played a central role in shaping the construction of history and national identity, the erroneous representation is still being carried out in our communication. As Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*, nations are socially constructed, and many African borders were arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers with little regard for ethnic and cultural realities. This artificial nation-building process led to identity crises and conflicts that persist to this day. Rewriting history from an African perspective requires active participation, contextual storytelling, and involvement in crafting authentic narratives, yet these efforts often face resistance from dominant global structures that continue to favour Western interpretations of Africa's past and present.

Race remains a fundamental issue in development communication, as colonialism justified itself through racial hierarchies that positioned Africans as inferior. (Fanon, 1961), in *Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth*, explored how colonialism inflicted deep psychological wounds, shaping the self-perception of colonized peoples. Even after independence, race continues to define global power relations, with African identity frequently framed through a Western lens. This is evident in the structures of international organizations, where communication roles in Africa are often held by outsiders with little lived experience of the issues they discuss. For example, World Health Organization (WHO) representatives and global health experts frequently lead conversations on African health challenges without fully understanding the local context, yet they serve as the primary voices shaping international policy.

### **There is no Modernity Without Colonization.**

Firstly, Decoloniality is a critical theory that emerged to challenge the dominant Eurocentric rationality. It entails the unmasking of the dominant world system as well as the recasting of what the West has done to humanity. The approach originated in Latin America with scholars such as Ramon Grosfoguel, Walter D Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar Quijano and Maria Luganes. Leading decolonial thinker (Mignolo, 2010) pointed out the relationship between modernity and coloniality as he stated: "The rhetoric of modernity is that of salvation, whereas the logic of coloniality is a logic of imperial oppression. They go hand in hand, and you cannot have modernity without coloniality; the unfinished project of modernity carries over its shoulders the unfinished project of coloniality. (Smith, 2012) agrees with this assertion because Decoloniality is not static, she describes it as a cultural, social and political process. The other necessary distinction is between Decolonization and Decoloniality. Decolonization is a political process while Decoloniality extends into knowledge production, culture and linguistics

Decolonization is not merely about political independence; it requires dismantling colonial knowledge systems and reimagining development from an Indigenous perspective while placing the beneficiary at the centre of all interventions. (Mbembe, 2001) argues that postcolonial states often replicate colonial structures, maintaining hierarchical and exclusionary communication systems and thereby creating a new form of colonization led by governments and NGOs. In terms of a theoretical framework for decolonization, Creolization theory (Murdoch, 2023) highlights the blending of cultures, seen in media that mix local dialects with global languages. Further, the site-specific theory (Krishnaswamy & Goldi, 2022) considers local knowledge in the context of globalization and migration, while development media theory (McQuail, 1987) sees media as a driver of socio-economic progress rather than just a government tool involving beneficiary and consumer perspectives. A Rights-Based Approach (RBA) shifts development from mere participation to self-determination by integrating human rights into policy and practice because development cannot exist without human interest and rights. Decolonization also calls for the critical examination of knowledge both historical, and emerging (Chiorean, 2022), recognizing indigenous worldviews (Spivak, 1988), and empowering marginalized voices to participate in development (Fanon, 1961). It promotes authentic representation (Bhabha, 1994), national self-determination (Anderson, 1983), and South-South collaboration to reshape global power dynamics and create independent

To truly decolonize development communication, several key shifts are necessary: A key priority would be replacement of colonial approach with a Human-centered design (HCD) approaches to development communication strive to support the development of innovative, effective, and person-centered solutions for

development and communication. This approach will prioritize empathy, ensuring that our narratives are deeply rooted in users' real context, needs, behaviors, and challenges. It emphasizes collaboration, inclusivity and accessibility, creating designs that cater to diverse populations, including those with disabilities.

Decolonize methodologies and theory, (Speak,2014) likens the significance of communication to man as breathing; adding that it facilitates the spread of knowledge and Forms the bedrock of every relationship between people, organizations and groups, interests, etc (Suresh ,2003) argues that the study of communication and mass media has resulted in the formulation of many theories such as structural and functional theories which support the understanding that social structures are real and function in ways that can be observed objectively unfortunately most of the theories and methodologies as well as communication standards are developed by the global north, these means the approach to the sector is still driven and laced with coloniality, there is need to create new Africa led, contextualized methodologies, theory, approach and standards that not only take note of our unique position as a post colony but also utilize local resources, people to contribute to the envisioned development.

Decolonizing knowledge and narratives: The centre stage of development is knowledge, and how it is constructed, shared and communicated. The Development discourse must move beyond the Western gaze and incorporate indigenous knowledge, way of knowing, research and histories that capture the unique African experience. Scholars advocate for integrating indigenous epistemologies into education and media ensuring not just representation but also diversity, inclusion and self-determination. This includes revising curricula, promoting local storytelling traditions, and prioritizing African perspectives in development research and communication. This means that for development communications the key focus should be mining and sharing local stories within context while communicating progressive transformation as opposed to old pictures of what Africa is and used to be. This also means giving a voice to the owners of the development stories. Capturing the histories correctly and ensuring representation beyond race, gender, age, etc.

Decolonizing language: In the mid-20th century, as the global colonial order collapsed, language and education were two of the most effective, politically, and economically challenging- ging domains of decolonization efforts. Language plays a central role in shaping worldviews, creating relationships and sharing culture and social interactions in a society. The elevation of Indigenous languages in media, education, and governance is crucial for reclaiming cultural identity while allowing Indigenous knowledge sharing without losing content in translation. This for development communication would mean funding and planning for local language inclusion in all materials and not merely translating into French and English. As nations, such as Rwanda transition from French to Kinyarwanda, development partners must also continuously transition with the nations in supporting the use of local languages in development, dissemination and even media.

Participatory and community-led communication: In 1997, Art. 6 of UN General Assembly Resolution 51/172, the following definition is adopted: "Development communication underlines the need to support two-way communication systems that allow dialogue and allow communities to speak, express their aspirations and concerns, and participate in decisions related to their development. As we transition to a human-centred development model, we need to ensure traditional development communication models to a participatory space ensuring that the beneficiaries and actors in the programs are not merely recipients of our communication but are co-creators in development. A decolonized approach to communication prioritizes grassroots participation, ensuring that marginalized voices shape development agendas. Community radio stations, digital storytelling initiatives, and participatory media projects have demonstrated success in amplifying local voices.

Reframing aid and development partnership narrative: In an interview with Mario Nawfal, a media personality on X, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda asserted that foreign assistance is often weaponized to influence the policies and decisions of recipient countries. The "white gaze of development" often portrays Africa as a continent in perpetual crisis, conflict and thereby justifying continuous foreign intervention. Moving beyond aid dependency requires shifting the focus to trade, investment, and self-determined economic strategies. The Danish government's 2023 decision to rethink its Africa engagement strategy signals a growing recognition of Africa's geopolitical importance beyond aid. This approach also means the portrayal of development is hence replaced by aid but partnership. Unfortunately, the partnership approach has also left a lot of African countries

in debt.

Change in the main house, institutional reforms in global development organizations: Ownership and funding are still heavily tied to the West, and this means that management and operational control still belong to the same people who were once behind colonization. To move away from this development communication must challenge existing power hierarchies within international institutions. Addressing disparities in funding, representation, and decision-making processes is essential to creating fair partnerships between the Global North and South. This also means developing nations must also actively fund local narratives while promoting education of local communication talents who can highlight the lived experiences in those countries.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there would be no development communication if there was never colonization. There would also be no need for decolonization if true independence had been achieved. In truth the effects of colonization will be with us and wrapped in our history and present, however, decolonization offers a path to change that can contribute to a shared agenda to deliver the envisioned transformation and development in the continent. Communication in development is a conduit in the decolonization process. The decolonization of development communication is an urgent ongoing and necessary process. Breaking free from colonial narratives requires not only challenging existing structures but also fostering new ways of thinking while recognizing our shared history, and knowledge, communicating, and representing development. Africa is not a problem to be solved but a powerhouse of innovation, resilience, and cultural wealth and our communication need to represent this. As (Amartya Sen ,2000) emphasized, development must be defined by the people it seeks to serve, not imposed from external perspectives.

To achieve meaningful change, development communication must embrace inclusivity, linguistic diversity, and participatory engagement al while recognizing the transforming space and platforms aided by technology, to retain relevance and engagement. Development communication must also critically reflect on its historical foundations, ensuring that the voices of those most affected by development policies are at the centre of the conversation. Only by dismantling colonial legacies and reimagining development through an indigenous lens can truly transformative and sustainable progress be realized.

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