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### Self-determination in practice: the critical making of indigenous media

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# Self-determination in practice: the critical making of indigenous media

*Juan Francisco Salazar*

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*The article examines the notion of development as self-determination in the context of current politicisation of indigenous peoples' affairs. It looks at the links between development studies, indigenous social movements, and community media practices; and more specifically between specific views on development, self-determination, and identity, and how these terms become embodied in specific media-making (video) practices. The article summarises two case studies of indigenous media production in a transnational context: the UNESCO-funded project Information and Communications Technologies for Intercultural Dialogue: Developing Communication Capacities of Indigenous People (ICT4ID), and the emergence and consolidation of CLACPI, a network of indigenous media producers in Latin America.*

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Globalisation; Governance and public policy; Rights; Technology; Latin America and the Caribbean

## Introduction

'Development' remains one of the most contested terms in contemporary social and cultural research. The field continues to be a battleground, from the realm of the symbolic to the nuts and bolts of political economy. Since the late 1980s, there has been a healthy debate in development studies – some would argue a deconstructive turn – at least in the ways development is constructed and contested within Western philosophical traditions. The critique has come not only from social scientists and researchers working within the field in the global South and North, but also from practitioners, activists, and local development experts, who (in more ways than one) are also caught up in the uses and contestations of development discourses. Among the most salient of these critiques to the notion of development (in relation to the theme of this article) are arguments on the beneficial effect of grassroots mobilisation on development (Escobar 1995), the socially constructed nature of development (Mosse 2005), and the notion of development as freedom (Sen 2001).<sup>1</sup> These authors, among others, share the view that development is inherently unstable and in flux, and have brought forward the issue that participants should be central in determining the meaning of development, which is often grounded in local contexts and local knowledges. In this sense, in this paper I argue for a conceptualisation of development as self-determination. This determination towards deconstruction in development studies, or what has been called the 'decolonizing of the mindset

of development' (Power 2003: 28), was also taken up in communication studies, particularly development communication research (Huesca 1996; Servaes 2001; White *et al.* 1994).

As post-colonial critiques have shown – and despite being heterogeneous, fluid, and contested – development continues to operate in most cases as a construction grounded in Western idealism and analytical thought. As Mosse (2006) has proposed, development works to maintain itself as a system of representations as much as an operational system that mostly serves to produce certain policy models and authoritative views. In a way, it is a modern figurative use of an earlier French term *desveloper*, meaning 'undoing a wrap up', or something like 'de-enveloping'. In this regard, development has been an envelope of ideals and models of progress that tends to impose a certain view of social change over other views. Development (as the notion of envelopment suggests) has been an all-encompassing, pervasive, invasive, persistent, and insidious term. But the dominant development paradigms based on the incessant pursuit of economic growth are no longer valid, and have given some way to approaches seeking a better integration of cultural development, social justice, and environmental sustainability.

### Declaring development: a question of cognitive justice

For indigenous peoples worldwide development continues to be in most instances a consistently problematic term. It still brings about connotations of the means by which neo-liberal policies deployed by states and transnational corporations continue to profit from indigenous cultural and natural resources. The notion of *indigenous peoples* itself is also an ideological construction put in circulation as a form of domination in a context of increased politicisation of indigenous life. This increased politicisation of indigenous issues may be understood in two ways. On the one hand lies the recognition of an intellectual and discursive field of theorisation on identity politics and indigenous peoples' matters, relating to an increased interest in what has been referred to as 'Fourth World theory' (Griggs 1992; Seton 1999). On the other hand and on a different level, this conceptualisation also refers to the fact that despite indigenous identities becoming increasingly managed and organised through state policies since the late 1970s, politicisation also draws on the strategic responses by indigenous cultural formations to the nature of sovereign power of the modern states in which they have in most cases been forcefully inserted. In this regard, this politicisation occurs in a broader context of the globalisation of social life.

Indigenous peoples had been, until the 1990s, physically absent from decision-making forums on development (Tauli-Corpuz 1993), and made invisible during centuries of external and internal colonialism. Since the early 1980s, however, there has been an increase in the presence of indigenous peoples in the international arena. Indigenous peoples' struggles are now 'carried on within complex transnational networks and alliances that traverse the boundaries between the state, markets and civil society, including the environmentalist and human rights movements' (Blaser *et al.* 2004). This fresh visibility in global affairs marks a new realm for both local and national indigenous politics, at the local, regional, national, and transnational levels, and presumes a new reality that traverses eco-politics, access to and control of information and communication, international law, the politics and economics of health, traditional systems of knowledge, and control over representation in the media.

The politically conscious strategic use of transnational governance regulatory frameworks as mechanisms for legal recognition as *nations* may also be thought as a tactical way for *declaring* development. Indigenous peoples have declared their right to self-determination, and their right to conceive development in their own way once this concept is translated into everyday life practices, and its meaning deferred into locally embedded knowledge (per Derrida 1982). The way indigenous organisations worldwide have efficiently used international legal

frameworks (such as Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization 1989) as a sort of ‘paper power’ (Geslin and Hertz 2005), is an indication of how development has been critically deconstructed. In September 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ by a vote of 143 in favour, 4 against, and 11 abstentions. This was a confirmation of an earlier ratification by the United Nations Human Rights Council, which had adopted the declaration a year earlier. The declaration has a long history, going back ten years *before* it was first drafted in 1993. The declaration was formally developed in its later stages through the work of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues – established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2000 – with a mandate to discuss indigenous issues within the mandate of the Council relating to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health, and human rights.

The Declaration is a comprehensive statement addressing the rights of indigenous peoples. As a declaration, it enacts a public announcement whereby indigenous representatives of many nations have spoken out, asserting their interest in taking control over the means of their cultural and economic development. Like all other UN Declarations, it is not legally binding on states; however, it does mark a dynamic advance of international legal norms and reflects the commitment of states to move in certain directions, and their reluctance to abide by certain international principles. But in some regard, and assuming the declaration is the ‘voice’ embodied on paper of indigenous movements worldwide, it surely should imply a reshaping of current structures of governance to give more power to local and global civil society organisations. The document itself emphasises the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures, and traditions, and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations. The Declaration confirms the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination, as well as their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic and social development. For this reason, the Declaration is a political statement to indicate the need for strengthening traditional governance systems and authorities.

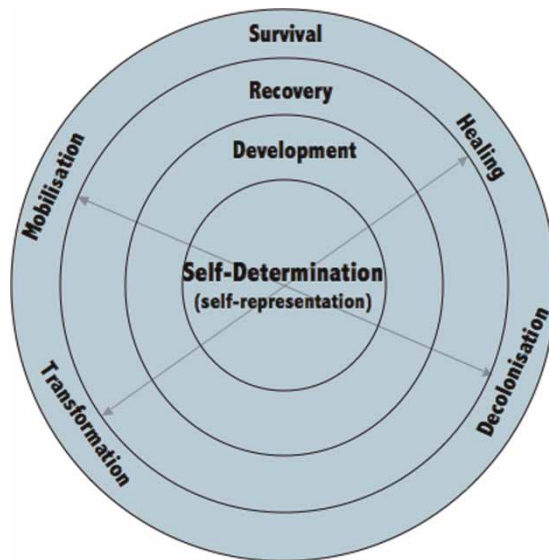
Declaring the right to self-determination is declaring development. In many regards this will entail that many of the rights included in the Declaration will need new approaches to global and national governance, including development issues within pluricultural societies. By the right to self-determination, indigenous peoples must freely determine their political status and pursue economic, social, and cultural development through maintaining and strengthening their distinct political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions, while retaining their rights to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the state. This equation of development and self-determination is not that different from Sen’s view of development in terms of ‘expanding substantive freedoms’ (Sen 2001: 3) in that it points to the importance of the ends of development (self-determination in this case), as well as the means that play an important part in achieving that end.

Not coincidentally, the four countries that voted against the Declaration (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA) maintained a position of no support because of concerns over provisions on self-determination, particularly on conflicting views over land, water, and other resources, and the potential ‘veto’ that indigenous organisations may have over national legislation and state and corporate management of resources. The four countries in question expressed dissatisfaction with the references to self-determination in the text and the possible consequences of social mobilisation towards territorial independence. Their rejection was a direct reaction to views asking for an open decolonisation of the notion of development, a kind of barrier to freedom in Sen’s view, in which development is seen not as the ultimate goal of social progress, economic growth, and environmental sustainability, but – in this particular case – as a step towards indigenous self-determination.

These ideas have been at the core of, for example, Kaupapa Maori research – a set of theoretical and emancipatory approaches stemming out of Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1990s. These approaches have commonalities and similar concerns with other broad critical theories and deal primarily with the displacement of oppressive knowledge and a social change agenda. In Figure 1, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explains the epistemologies of Maori research as a way to propose a decolonisation of research methodologies regarding indigenous development.

This visualisation of Maori knowledge understands development not as a goal, but as a means towards self-determination. Smith explains that its concentric pattern is the tides and waves of social and cultural change, which map the interconnected survival, recovery, and development cycles centred around a core of self-determination. Development can only happen once cultural survival, recognition, and recovery have been achieved. As Graham Hingangaroa Smith (1997) advocates, Kaupapa Maori acknowledges first and foremost the importance of ensuring the survival and revival of Maori language and culture as steps to understand the centrality of self-determination to Maori cultural well-being. In Linda Smith's view, the movement from the outer circle of survival towards the core of self-determination is balanced among four aspects: healing–transformation and mobilisation–decolonisation, which points to an open declaration to decolonise research and a political statement to achieve self-determination through mobilisation.

This approach and its emphasis on the importance of transnational networks of social movements<sup>2</sup> resonates quite clearly with the ideas of the post-development framework of the mid-1990s and the critique that development is not necessarily *the* central organising principle of social life. Now, a salient difference might be that indigenous scholarship focuses on development as discourse and the materiality of practice, without overlooking the political economy of poverty and exclusion happening in the complexity of the local. In his discussion of a Maori approach to creating knowledge, for example, Bishop observes that researchers in Kaupapa Maori contexts are 'repositioned in such a way as to no longer need to seek to give voice to others, to empower others, to emancipate others, to refer to others as subjugated voices, but



**Figure 1:** Development as a step towards self-determination and the critical role of media self-representation  
Source: after L.T. Smith (1999).

rather to listen and participate . . . in a process that facilitates the development in people as a sense of themselves as agentic and of having an authoritative voice' (Bishop 1998: 207–208).

What is of particular interest in these approaches is that they take social change as a material change (recovery, inclusion, survival, and the needs for material development), but also as an epistemological transformation. The demands of indigenous social movements worldwide towards self-determination are claims to what Visvanathan (2005) calls 'cognitive justice'; that is, the right for different knowledges to coexist, and to carry weight in the decisions that affect people's lives (Leach and Scoones 2005: 36). These claims for cognitive justice go well beyond the epistemic, to really assert an ontological difference with Western views of development, as epitomised, for example, by the reactions of the Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and US governments to the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In this regard, these new authoritative voices on development span from finding ways for bringing indigenous voices into wider economic and cultural policy development, or indigenous views on perceived solutions to climate-change mitigation and adaptation, to dealing with businesses and NGOs, discussing intellectual property rights, and securing biodiversity and cultural diversity. In many ways, they are a way to counter 'voice poverty', understood as 'the inability of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making' (Tacchi 2007).

## Performing development: the embedded aesthetics of indigenous video

Declaring development is a performative act. As such, the declaration becomes a site of resistance as it expresses and embodies moral ties to the communities represented in this text, and legitimises indigenous worldviews on development and self-determination. As Denzin points out 'the performative is political . . . [and] provides the context for resisting neo-liberal and neo-conservative attacks on the legitimacy of the world view in question' (Denzin 2003: 32). Smith states the issue clearly when claiming that 'the struggle for the validity of indigenous knowledges may no longer be over the recognition that indigenous people have ways of knowing the world which are unique, but over proving the authenticity of, and control over, our own forms of knowledge' (L.T. Smith 1999: 104).

In looking at the role that video practices play within these contestations on notions of development and self-determination, we understand that the core concept at stake is self-representation. As in Figure 1, survival and recovery make up the pillars through which self-representation might be achieved. Most importantly, the political responsibility to ensure the right of indigenous people to autonomous forms of communication by allowing control, ownership, and self-management of communication and information media is critical. Denzin (2003) sees the performative as a way of being, as a way of knowing, and as a way of being political. The performative is where the soul of the culture resides. The performative haunts the liminal spaces of the culture. I have referred to this performative nature of indigenous cultural activism in reference to indigenous video as the poetics of indigenous video (Salazar 2004; Salazar and Córdova 2008). In this particular way, *indigenous media* can be thought of as a defiant form of political activism and more broadly as specific instances of cross-cultural communication. But the term 'indigenous media' also involves a series of social relations that lie beyond a videotape, or a programme, or any other *product* of information and communication. It demands the consideration of a formal socio-technical assemblage of technologies, resources, social organisations, legal frameworks and bureaucracies, cultural principles, and imagery, into a representational form embodied in *processes* that extends beyond the completed

product. Faye Ginsburg (1994) refers to this as the *embedded aesthetics* of indigenous media, where cultural products must be understood within the social and cultural systems in which they are produced.

Take, for example, the work of the Coordinadora Latino-Americana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas (CLACPI), which has been critical in creating a discursive space for indigenous media in Latin America. Along the way, it has created new spaces of participation within national media discourses (production, circulation, and reception). The appropriation of video has functioned as a sort of 'reverse conquest' (Bengoa 2000), where indigenous organisations and community media producers have been slowly conquering back their rights to self-representation. Within this framework, indigenous video exists within a larger 'communicative ecology' (Slater *et al.* 2002) that includes the social solidarities of collective community media making, the appropriation and use of a wide range of information and communication technologies that includes radio, print media, Internet, and traditional and symbolic forms of communication, and also the discursive space of critical media making and practice. Access to video media can certainly be viewed as an issue of empowerment, but empowerment lies ultimately in the fact that indigenous media makers become critical producers of content, or what Tacchi (2007) refers to as participatory 'creative engagement'.

So again, development is a crucial step, but not an ultimate goal; a step towards processes of self-representation, autonomous communication, and broadly speaking, a step towards a self-determined development. Video, or any other media or information and communications technology (ICT), is neither sufficient nor a necessary condition for development. Indigenous video entails not only a critical thinking on the decolonisation of development communication, but a critical making of innovative content. In many ways, CLACPI functions as a network that provides what Gumucio Dagron (2003) calls the 'handful of essentials for ICT in development': community ownership, local content, appropriate technology, language and cultural pertinence, and convergence and networking. In this regard, the CLACPI festivals, perhaps more than any other of their kind, demonstrate how video might strengthen indigenous philosophies and worldviews, or beliefs and practices which promote harmony and sustained interaction with the environment. By looking at the awards given at the CLACPI festivals, it is clear how they endorse the importance of indigenous forms of political governance and justice systems, and the protection and reinforcement of traditional knowledge systems. The films and videos are awarded prizes according very specific criteria that point towards rewarding processes as much as quality of the products. The aim is to promote inter-cultural dialogue and communication rights through the creative use of aesthetic and narrative resources. For example, films that reflect the rights to freedom and self-determination of indigenous peoples; films that foster respect and dignity of indigenous peoples; films that call attention to and denounce human-rights violations, persecution of indigenous peoples; films and videos that promote gender equality and the rights of indigenous women; films and videos that contribute to the strengthening of indigenous identities and cultures; films and videos that contribute to the organising processes and struggles of indigenous peoples; and also, films and videos that express the notion of development from an indigenous perspective.

The idea of development as inter-cultural dialogue and communication rights has also been taken very seriously by UNESCO, an organisation that has played a pivotal role in providing an umbrella to the advance of indigenous media worldwide. In general terms, UNESCO has provided an international governance platform through key policies and has developed key development communication projects to promote indigenous media practice and production.

In the first instance (transnational frameworks), UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), and the subsequent Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity

of Cultural Expressions (2005) have been important milestones towards the formal recognition of the dynamic nature of culture and the centrality of inter-cultural dialogue. While they haven't had the impact of ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples – as the legitimacy that indigenous people have obtained as partially denationalised political subjects has failed to articulate with the national form – they do set very specific parameters for the recognition of the rights to self-representation in the media. At the same time, one of the most pressing tasks for UNESCO is to incorporate these principles into the national policies of states, which is what indigenous organisations worldwide are seeking.

In the second case (specific initiatives), UNESCO has developed a series of communication initiatives that engage in indigenous media production. Initiatives such as (fostering ICTs for linguistic diversity in cyberspace), Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) (a project aiming to use ICTs to strengthen the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations and across local and global communities), and ICTs for Intercultural Dialogue: Developing Communication Capacities for Indigenous Peoples demonstrate UNESCO's interest in fostering the development of indigenous media practices across the world.

The ICT4ID Project<sup>3</sup> was launched at the UNESCO International Forum on Local Cultural Expression and Communication held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic in 2003. The project was conducted in two stages. In the first stage (2004–2005), five projects from indigenous organisations and local partners in Bolivia, Gabon, Namibia, Peru and South Africa were selected, and in the second stage (2006–2007) projects from Kenya, Russia, Peru, and Bolivia. The broad aims defined by UNESCO were the preservation of indigenous peoples' cultural resources under the threat of globalisation, and the opening of access to communication means and technologies, in order to assist indigenous peoples' inclusion in the information society. In this regard, UNESCO was aligning itself with the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) action plan on preserving indigenous peoples' cultural resources by fostering access to ICT, and expecting to contribute to narrowing the digital divide existing in many parts of the world. In 2004, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) had already recommended that the National Commissions for UNESCO work more closely with indigenous experts to increase the participation of indigenous peoples in UNESCO activities. The Forum had also recommended that UNESCO should bring together indigenous experts and specialists to constitute an international network integrating the fields of education, science, culture, and communication in order to forge a partnership between UNESCO and indigenous peoples. This partnership was again made official on paper through the document *UNESCO and Indigenous Peoples: Partnership to promote cultural diversity* (2006). The global media governance that UNESCO seems to provide certainly opens up potential sites for interventions by indigenous peoples.

But UNESCO's rather essentialist view – that the use of ICTs itself will contribute to enhancing indigenous peoples' cultural identities and fighting discrimination – must be taken with caution. The same should be said of the ever-abundant technocratic approaches to poverty alleviation, social inclusion, and economic development of many states, NGOs, and international cooperation agencies. What many UNESCO and other similar projects in communication and media for development seem to lack is a deeper understanding or reference to the social movements in which these projects are grounded, or a more profound acknowledgement of the key role of civic agency in social and cultural change. As Huesca (2001), Feek (2005), and Downing (2001) – among many others – suggest, studying social movements is critical to understanding the possibilities of alternative media practices. Initiatives that don't regard the importance of social movements will certainly appreciate the importance of tackling issues of cultural survival and recovery, but might not be able to dig deep into the politics of self-representation. The ICT4ID projects<sup>4</sup> have been a relatively successful attempt to

promote inter-cultural dialogue as a way of fostering social, cultural, and economic development, but have probably been less successful in setting up a series of best practices on indigenous media production. The project itself has done little else in understanding or creating alternative avenues for indigenous media production beyond the traditional broadcasting model. If the main goals of these projects were to encourage the production of indigenous cultural content (including convergent new media contexts) by providing ICT training to community members and international exposure to locally produced contents, questions of sustainability still remain unanswered; and not just financial sustainability, but more specifically the pillars of social sustainability at the local level.

While participatory communication has become mainstream thinking among theorists and practitioners alike, the application of these principles on the ground remains a difficult task. The problem continues to be that major donor agencies emphasise short-term interventions with quantitative evaluation mechanisms (Deane 2001), and this is precisely one of the shortfalls of this UNESCO project. Local agency continues to be the essence of development; and development discourse, as Escobar (1995) reminds us, has been a core and ubiquitous operator of the politics of representation and identity. Indigenous media makers in Bolivia have stressed the importance of appropriating media as a way for decolonising the intellect; for deconstructing the very essence of Western 'structurations' (per Giddens 1984) of media practice and content creation. Projects such as the UNESCO ICT4ID are highlighting the need to do more scoping activities to fully identify the gains and challenges faced by indigenous peoples in pursuing self-determined development. In this way, the degree of sustainable long-term impact of a project seeking to build capacity in indigenous communication must start by acknowledging that local leaders determine the local action priorities in consultation with local communities, which are often grounded in broader processes of social change. The decolonisation of development strategies (in communication or elsewhere) emerges not only from critical theory, but also from critical practice, and the recognition that the critical making of media is embedded in complex socio-cultural negotiations.

## Notes

1. The crises in interpretation plaguing both development studies and communication for development was seen as a critical impasse in the 1990s, consisting of a dispersion of the notion of development into several different areas which scholars often have trouble in bringing together (Schuurman 1993; see also Blaser *et al.* 2004; Schuurman 2000). Some authors even argued that after 40 years of an 'age of development', the time was ripe to write its obituary (Sachs 1992). The balancing act of framing development post-1989 has been a critical enterprise, particularly as modernisation and dependency approaches have fallen more and more out of fashion, and the rise of post-structural critiques has gained force.
2. I have discussed this in more detail in relation to the transnational networks of Mapuche Internet activists working in complex local/global articulations (Salazar 2003).
3. This section of the paper is based on previous unpublished work undertaken as part of an evaluation team led by Laurel E. Dyson, University of Technology, Sydney, for the UNESCO ICT4ID, Communication and Information Sector, UNESCO, Paris (see Dyson *et al.* 2006).
4. Summaries of the projects of phase 1 can be accessed at [portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=23284&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23284&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (retrieved 29 April 2008).

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