

Raising awareness

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It is becoming increasingly clear that information and communication are fundamental to any action the international community wishes to take. If all governments could now be said to have reached agreement that development cannot exist without participation, it is difficult to understand how one can have participation without communication. By the same token, grassroots participation – and this is something widely called for from many different quarters – is at the end of the day a question of communication.

Sadly, the final declaration of the World Conference includes but one paragraph on this: paragraph 39. It reads: 'Underlining the importance of objective, responsible and impartial information about human rights and humanitarian issues, the World Conference on Human Rights encourages the increased

involvement of the media, for whom freedom and protection should be guaranteed within the framework of national law.'

In other words, the conference encourages the media to write about human rights, and calls for this to be ensured through some degree of freedom and protection.

If this formula is how the participants at the Vienna conference viewed the role of information and communication in the framework of human rights, then there are reasonable grounds to be concerned about the ability of 'the system' to keep step with today's realities or begin to understand the real world in which we operate.

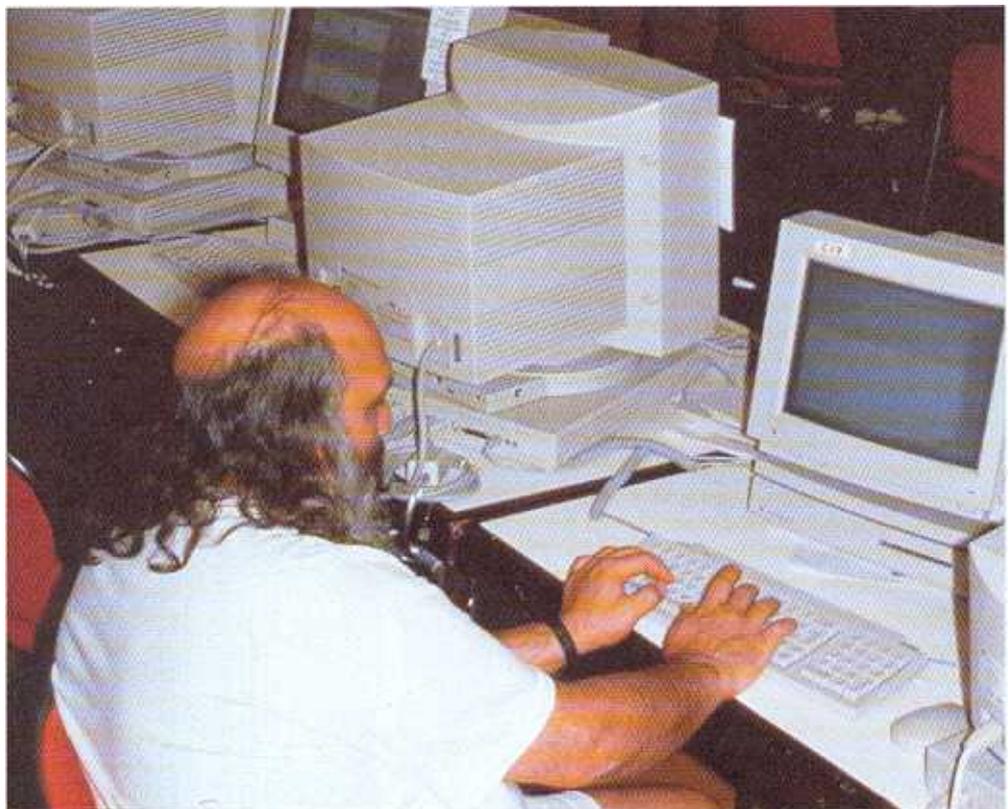
It is striking that the paragraph refers only to media – that is, to the world of 'information' – and totally ignores the much wider and more socially relevant issue of 'communication'. That is doing a disservice to the cause of

Communication should be a right in itself – the right of people to be informed and to express themselves without restraint

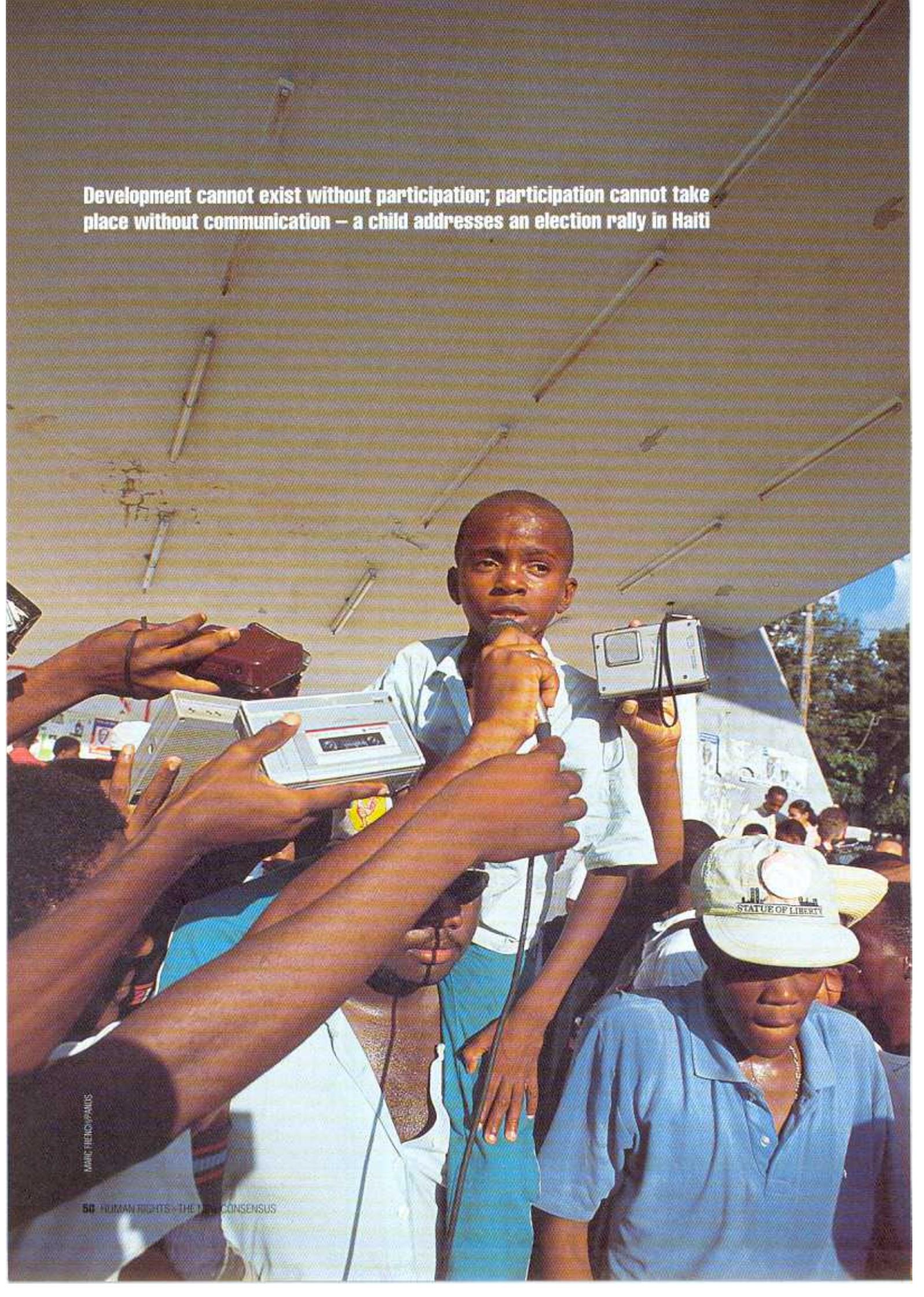
With the consolidation of democracy in Brazil and despite the structural problems inherited from the past, the observance of human rights is a high priority of the Brazilian Government. The proliferation of world conflicts since the end of the Cold War and the resurgence of intolerance are proof that difficulties in this area are on the increase everywhere. Brazil deemed the Vienna Conference on Human Rights to be of paramount importance towards ensuring that human rights are universally enjoyed.

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Development cannot exist without participation; participation cannot take place without communication – a child addresses an election rally in Haiti



The UN chose an opportune moment to convene the World Conference on Human Rights. Recent dramatic political changes in the world have aroused in many people long-suppressed hopes for a better future for humanity. The spread of democracy is intimately linked to the promotion of fundamental freedoms. To ensure that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is respected in practice requires the consolidation of plural societies, widespread human rights education and real and lasting development. I earnestly hope that the Conference will have made a significant contribution to progress towards universal enjoyment of human rights.

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human rights because it is communication, not information, that is shaping historical changes in the world of today.

Just take the new computerized technology that is rapidly opening up new frontiers for grassroots communication, for 'horizontal communication', bypassing the 'vertical' structures of an 'information' system that has served to tell people how to think and what to think about. In a way, it is precisely the latter that helped get us in the mess that conferences like this are supposed to solve, on paper at least.

So the statement adopted is, in this respect, a step backwards for information and communication, since it fails to address the very fundamental fact that these two are in themselves a basic human right. It simply 'encourages' the media (and not the people) to support human rights information within national legislation (which has been widely used in the past to curb freedom of expression).

More and more national legislatures and governments have to take into account the principle that it is on the basis of local agencies that their operations are going to be judged.

Like the Rio Summit on Environment and Development, the Vienna Conference opened up a new philosophy to underpin international relations, one based on a holistic approach in which issues like environment and human rights are becoming codes of conduct and of judgment. This process will continue in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and the year after in Beijing at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

Also in 1995, the year of the world body's 50th anniversary and of the World Summit for Social Development, there will be occasion for the United Nations to reflect. This is all part of a new paradigm for the international community in the post-Cold War era.

Central to all of this is the question of participation and communication. The Preamble of the UN Charter drawn up in San Francisco says 'We, the peoples of the United Nations' not 'We, the governments of the world'.

The growing participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), of the 'civil society', in the world of international relations is the right direction to head in search of a new world, based on cooperation, mutual respect and solidarity. It is important to note that this process has the full support of the world of NGOs, a world that is growing day by day thanks to the new possibilities for networking. On the conference site itself, we had the Association for Progressive

Communication (APC), an international NGO network that reaches more than 12,000 individual users and NGOs around the world every day.

Yet the member states of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), to take one example, allocate less than 0.4 per cent of their aid budgets to communications. What is worse, they fail to assess projects in a holistic way, they fail to relate funding to the whole range of issues that come into play in any one single development project – like women, children, environment and, not to forget, participation and communication. The reason is simple: governments continue to confuse information (by and large the preserve of the mass media) with communication (the necessary infrastructure that enables people to participate in the processes that interest and affect them).

At the Conference itself, to rub salt in the wound, delegates completely ignored a simple truth: communication is a right in itself – it is the right of people to communicate, to be informed, to express themselves, without constraint.

Even more, freedom of expression and participation cannot be confined to the media alone. The issue is a global issue. How come then there is absolutely no reference to this in the conceptual part of the draft declaration? That is a startling omission, and one that should have been clearly and unequivocally pointed out by the NGO community, not just in Vienna but far ahead of the human rights conference.

Another interesting and telltale point is how information is brought up in the draft declaration, inviting the media to 'increased involvement' because of the need for 'objective (here comes another of those worn-out myths), responsible and impartial information about human rights and humanitarian issues.'

The Conference only sees the media as a practical tool for what it considers the 'important' issues, that is why it encourages increased involvement. For those who know how newspaper editors function, an invitation from the conference to be more involved smacks of paternalism and instrumentation.

It is too late to ask the World Conference to rethink this. But it is not too late to ask those in the field of information and communication to be more active in promoting wider awareness of human rights and humanitarian issues.

Dare we ask that freedom and protection be accorded to all of them and that national legislation no longer be constructed to hamper those important human rights?