On knowledge divides between North and South

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1. Repeated scenes

The same scene repeats in many parts of the planet, but especially along the so-called "Global South" (a term that is intended for replacing the label "underdeveloped countries" or its euphemism, "developing countries"): governments and big institutions publicly declare their intention to make the different gaps narrower, for example the information gap. They pompously announce new plans of [informational] literacy, generous donations of computers and informative resources, large number of materials and services provided, even the building of educational and social infrastructures in marginalized zones, rural areas or aboriginal communities. For doing this, they echo national and international legislations in terms of human, children, woman, cultural, identity and heritage rights, and many more, which fulfill the pages of declarations such as the ones written by UNESCO, IFLA and a very large "etcetera". In addition, they move to regions quite far in distance –few times footed by civil servants, with the exception of having new elections in sight-, make speeches flooded with grandiloquent epithets and ask someone to take them a picture that will become spread widely by the news and will be published in the newspapers in order to demonstrate the state of progress and development reached by a particular area.

Certainly the scene repeats once and again, especially with indigenous peoples that seem to have became an excellent letter of introduction in every program bounded for turning into an "example of development". However, once the media and declarative storm has passed, reality appears sadly and clearly: the new structures that were recently built fall into pieces and do not count either with the endowment or with staff that might take care of them; the computers were left in communities where there is not electricity supply (much less Internet facilities or the knowledge to use it properly) and the informative resources are written in the dominant languages, little known by the population, and mainly deal with topics the community does not need, does not know or does not want to know because they are not within their expectations, needs or priorities.

Yes, the scene happens again. While statistics and international organizations echo the political discourses (and the other way round) and claim a number of good practices and to shorten the social, cultural and economic differences that exist in our world –as great and bitter as always- reality says, in a loud voice that everybody can hear, which are the real numbers, and shows situations of illiteracy, misunderstanding, lack of education, shortage of information, loss of identity and missing training… Problems that would be, all of them, solved with solidly built and well oriented programs

Digital divide and informative ditches are realities that can not be denied: they are palpable, easily noted by our mind or senses, not only in this global South always punished and always taken as an example of "poverty", but in the global North, which is also populated by many dispossessed people. Inequalities, far from disappearing, are getting bigger day after day. The question is "why do they exist?"

It does not only consist of unfair differences where some have more economic resources than others; of historical distances between those who "have" and those who don't; of an imbalance in social or political power… Obviously, those are the general basis of the problem, but there is something else: a wrong attitude. Divides and ditches do not appear suddenly: they are raised and dug day after day, step by step, and we are the ones who, with our attitude and our practice (or its absence) make it possible their reproduction and perpetuation.

When we speak about differences and barriers, about their analysis and likely solutions to those problematic situations, few times the voice of the addressee, his/her opinion or his/her interest is taken into account. S/he is considered as an object that needs help, an identity with no values or proper thoughts, which is urgently demanding our support in order to follow a particular path that we have determined according to our own cultural patterns: the path of knowledge (of *our* knowledge), the path of education (of *our* education), the path of development (as far as *our* society plans it in a way that is right or appropriate for its purposes). Nevertheless, the simplest common sense shows that there are not equal paths for two pairs of different feet, and that what is useful, easy and quick to do for someone can not be convenient for other.

Therefore, maybe when we do not pay attention or give the word to those "in need of help" we are taking the first mistaken attitude that will lead to the production of misunderstandings and omissions, which are, precisely, the ones that feed many world inequalities.

If we want to build bridges over the deep trenches that divide the humankind in every aspect of their life (including information), we should understand and accept, in first place, that dialogue is the basis of any kind of approach, and that this approach is the first step towards the comprehension of the "other", of his/her life, experiences, expectations, past and present, and also of the future that s/he desires for him/herself, which maybe won't be the same that we want for ourselves.

From our incomprehension –sometimes due to simple lack of consideration- "developed" societies continue finding problems that maybe are not such, and applying intending solutions –without asking others' opinion in advance, neither their permission- that do not work, which are doomed to failure or become useless because never was it previously asked (or thought) whether or not they would be of any use.

Many of those barriers that exist between the peoples, the societies and the contemporary human groups are there thanks to our actions and the attitudes that guided them in the past and keep on influencing our behavior. Our own hands have been the ones that, consciously or unconsciously, have given birth to them and still maintain them. If we want to drive our efforts to reduce and eliminate them, we should think, first of all, of a change in our own ideas and attitudes, for our actions become, effectively, the cranes that will destroy the walls, not the machines that will help to lift new bricks on the existing ones.

2. A first step: to listen to

In the specific case of the current differences concerning the access, the comprehension and the use of information on the part of diverse social sectors, the most likely solution should start by identifying the origin and the nature of the unbalance, the difference or the inequality...

From a western perspective, the lack of books and libraries might seem an important and serious matter. However, in the middle of many indigenous communities that still live today according to their traditional rules, such elements are useless at this moment,

since they neither consider their languages nor their communications channels, their cultures or their needs. From that very same point of view, the source of many social problems has its roots in the illiteracy and the lack of education. Nonetheless, from the main characters' way of thinking, such source uses to be a different one: the alarming loss of their identity, of their reasons for living, of their patrimony, of their culture and their opportunities. And the "official" literacy and education –considered as solutions- might not be anything else but pressures for acculturation that would make their real problems even more noticeable.

It seems clear that the viewpoints on the same situation can be very different, and the solutions needed and provided, at a great distance one from the other. When it happens, there is a lack of a close relation between the parties that will be responsible for the expected failures, for walls getting thicker and higher, and for the feeling of not being able to trust the models and systems that have confirmed their impossibility of providing any help or reaching some kind of understanding.

That is why the first step in the design of any proposal that be aimed at promoting a change within a particular sector of society should be *listen to the interested party*, pay attention to it, get to know it, come near to it and its daily circumstances. Grass-root development, action-research and the popular and critical pedagogy exactly set up that: the change stemming from the participative opinion of the addressee.

To listen to implies a number of things. On the one hand, it means to came near to a person, place yourself next to him/her, ask him/her and wait for his/her answer, paying attention to his/her voice, each single word and the silences between them; listening to whatever s/he has to say and tell. This suggest that an enormous effort should be made and a major step taken in a modern world that is mainly characterized by the accent put on the individual person, the isolation and, in consequence, the loss of inter-personal communication.

To listen to means, on the other hand, to be able to understand what the words say and silence, the language and the culture in which frame we can found the ideas or structure that form its background. It also suggests that the interlocutor lives in a social, cultural, temporal, political, ideological, religious and individual context that is completely different from ours, and that should be considered in depth if we want that the solution given in order to shorten distances between some groups be valid and valuable

To listen to also intends to think carefully of the "other", recognizing and valuating their existence. Above all, it forces someone to put him/herself at the same level of the "other", to get rid of distances and vertical structures, of status and empowerment, of prejudices and pre-concepts. It teaches how to put yourself in another person's shoes, especially when his/her situation is an unpleasant and difficult one. It will be at that very moment when we will be taking the first step towards real approaches: ditches, divides and walls that separate one from the other will be scheduled for demolition, and we will be laying the first brick on the bridge.

Listening allows us to know. Once we know a bit more of something we can learn much more about it, we can understand it better. And it is exercising our ability to understand that our comprehension will continue developing as much as the dialogue that should guide and produce it. It will be a remarkable achievement in the way of suggesting solutions worthy of their success.

3. A second step: to exchange opinions

A good number of international projects aimed at providing solutions to critical situations in countries of the global South, have been designed unilaterally, without the

agreement of the other members, based on the opinions, ideas and experiences of a group of "skilled" people (taking into account the standard of knowledge reached by their scholar training or their political position) for making decisions and drawing up the action guidelines. Never has it been established a dialogue with the community meant for that "help", in order to consider their opinion in the matter. Moreover, the plan has been put into action in a very paternalistic way, in an invasive, inconsiderate and totally unbalanced manner. Hence, a fundamental mistake has been perpetuated, which continue being the root of the many differences that keep on separating one from each other at the present (including digital divides): the belief that there is a unique model, which is not only "the best possible", but the one that "works better" and, as a consequence, the model that should be implemented everywhere for all to live "equally good".

On the contrary, through a fluid dialogue two situations will be promoted. Firstly, and by the simple fact of accepting him/her as interlocutor, the "other" existence would be recognized as well as his/her position and role, which is a very important step forward. Secondly, voice is given to those who have something to say in order to listen to their own words, to take into account the opinions and thoughts expressed by them, which is the principle behind the "free expression right" many times alluded but very few respected. Obviously, the term "dialogue" implies an exchange between equals. If we were acting in a different way, it would become merely a monologue, operating only in one direction: from the dominant towards the inferior position.

Through the dialogue it is more likely to exchange ideas, to take a position, to learn, to discuss and to gain an initial notion about the real problems and their feasible solutions. At the same time, it facilitates the identification of such problems, the search of their causes and the point from which they start, the explanation for their reasons –if it is likely to find some-, and the outline of the more likely paths towards the future considering the possibilities of the addressees community. Thanks to the dialogue we can build bridges: we can recognize the points of either shore where on their bricks will be laid. In addition it allows us to know which tools are available for going on with their construction. And, most importantly, it permits us to know the reason why they are going to be built.

From the beginning of the dialogue –egalitarian, free, open and likely to be affected by conflicts- a first step is taken towards the closing of ditches and the barriers reduction. As it develops, there should be a strong determination in the process that will refer to our commitment and the search of a balanced approach. From that moment onwards, we should also understand that the solution to the problems does not always consist in the help offered as a gesture of solidarity, rather in the joint effort that should involve the achievement of common goals.

4. Mistaken "helps"

There are a good number of cases of professionals (from different disciplines) who come near to disadvantaged populations or communities in order to show solidarity with them and offer their help, which can be synthesized as a (temporal) solution to the problems by using budgets, elements and tools coming from outside of the addressee group. The solution lasts as long as it lasts the staff that "helps" and their resources. As the popular Spanish saying goes, this is "bread for today and hunger for tomorrow".

The well-understood collaboration does not have its basis only on the urgent solution to the most serious problems, what, certainly, is necessary sometimes. It has to do with providing the training for particular addressees to be able to respond –with and answer

of their own, taking into account both the time and the form *they* consider to be the best possible- to the needs that they will have firstly identified as such. It implies the recognition that the human groups or sectors with particular problems, are not immersed in them because they like that state of things, but because they do not know how to solve, or cannot find ways to deal with them. In such situation, the mission of any professional is to provide his/her know-how: to train the addresses and allow them to do the rest in the frame of their own context, in a way that is appropriate for them and at a suitable moment. That way, we will be acknowledging the possibility of a sustainable development, far from paternalistic patterns and opposite to the invasive ones. Moreover, the addresses will experiment the sense of success that anybody can feel when is able to break, with his/her hands, the chains that have tied him/her for a long, long time.

In the case of information barriers and ditches, the sort of collaboration we are discussing in here should not be limited to the so called "help" that we have mentioned above. The fences that prevent people from accessing knowledge, having the right to education or expressing themselves freely, are particularly noticeable in our society and the results of such difficulties undermine its possibilities and make it weaker at the base. Considering the fact that the impossibility of accessing strategic and up-to-date information maintains entire groups in the shade of diseases, gross violation of human rights, political affairs, labor exploitation, environmental dangers, lootings, cultural and religious oppressions and a huge incapacity to answer back external aggressions, it is not difficult to understand how most of the current social and economical inequalities are sustained in the ignorance or the lack of information on the part of a great mass of people, who neither know what rights they have nor how to defend them, who cannot have access to the news or identify which elements are harmful to their health or to their environment… and a long and painful "etcetera" that covers pages and pages of numerous publications and prestigious international NGOs reports.

The collaboration, in this case, should not have either its basis on the provision of a "strange" model, such as the education system, the library, the book or the Internet. On the contrary, it should rest on the previous (ac)knowledge of the situation and the conditions, the dialogue, the solutions given by the addresses (since they are the ones who know them but have not been able to put them into practice yet) and their implementation from a grass-root perspective. It might happen that the Internet would not be the solution in the regions where there is not electricity or telephone wires, or where the contents on the Web are not useful for they have been written in a different language, from a different cultural reference framework and have nothing relevant to add. Maybe books would be useless in areas where writing is not the most accepted rule, or neither is the dominant language the one fluently spoken (and the books in minority languages are very few). It is also probable that the (traditional) library would not be the most proper answer to the needs faced by scattered populations, neither to illiterate or culturally oppressed ones: in that case, a radio or sounds collections might work better… We might also consider whether a formal school would be more or less necessary than a number of (in)formal workshops or a series of courses… It seems clear that the proposition of solutions from an external and western point of view –centered on the wrong belief that "our solutions always work and are the right ones as far as our status can easily demonstrate it"- does not always solve what it tries to work out; moreover, many times, only manages to close doors and make the situation worse.

5. Conclusion: walking other paths

If we admit that the dominant model, the one used mostly, the successful in certain circumstances, should not be considered as the "only one possible" when it comes to offer tools that will collaborate in the destruction of ditches and fences, then we will open the door to creativity and imagination. At the same time, we will be allowing local and peculiar community models to be put into practice and reach the success that they deserve. To tread on "alternative" paths is not always easy: the conventional walking paths use to present a safe and secure image to us that it is difficult to refuse. However, thousands of experiences throughout the entire world demonstrate that other movements are also possible. In the case of information divides, those experiences have been gained in different ways, and all of them have obtained small achievements, which have laid one brick more on that bridge we want to build over the abysm of ignorance.

The challenge and the struggle against a system, an order and a global machine built to perpetuate the *status quo* –those who have will continue having, and those who do not will keep on resting where on they are, being the platform for others to make more and more profit- can look like a bit utopian sometimes, and discourage many people who acknowledge how painful and inhuman it is that there are walls and moats to separate some human beings from others. The search of egalitarian, balanced, informed societies, able to read, write and learn according to their principles and patterns, is the search of an ideal that became the source for numerous social and political currents. It is the pursuit of a dream and it does not always have a happy end: there are many examples of complete disasters, uncertain projects and even repressions and prosecutions (more or less violent) on the part of the dominant system, which is not used to accepting challenges which are never of its liking. Nevertheless, it is an option and should be tried since every step taken in this sense would become a small great success. Each part of this process that we manage to finish and complete will be another rung on the ladder, another brick on the bridge, another step forward in shortening the distance that separate one from the other.

If human beings are born equals, with the same duties and the same rights, it is their destiny to look at each other's eyes at the same level. When this is not possible –no matter the reason why- something is working wrong. And any professional has the moral and ethical duty of trying to make those differences smaller: each one in his/her field, each one with the power s/he has in his/her hands and inside his/her mind. Each one will search his/her own path, which should accompany the "other's" path, the track of those who are behind the fence.