CULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Summary

In an interdisciplinary perspective that combines media studies, intercultural communication, discourse analysis, environmental studies, and development communication, a case study is presented for the broad topic of culture and the environment. The way man has been exploiting the environment is an integral part of culture as such as well as of any particular cultural tradition. The case study presented here explicates this complex relationship between mankind, culture and the environment by the example of African development communication focusing on projects to improve water quality and sanitary conditions.

1. The challenge

This is a report on a research project based on a joint initiative of the recently installed chair for *génie sanitaire* at the Institut du Génie de l'Environnement (IGE/GS) of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and the chair for Discourse at the Department of Germanic Studies of the University of Berne. It aims at bringing together at least six different perspectives of research hitherto operating in entirely separate fields: media studies, intercultural communication, conversation analysis, environmental studies, sanitary engineering, and development communication. The focal meeting point of these perspectives is discourse. It opens a dialogue on an issue of vital importance to ecology world wide: water. This serves as an example for key questions such as the communication of environmental conflicts in the mass media: can environmental awareness be awakened by the media? Can they alter everyday behavioral routines with respect to sustainable development? Can they be used to

improve intercultural instruction? (see **West/East and North/South Dialogue of Cultures Interculturality and Communicatio**n)

One of the major ecological problems of the near future will be the global water shortage, which is already today responsible for many political conflicts all over the world. Our main research interest, therefore, is to examine the increasingly important role of the media in communicating ecological problems caused by the shortage of water and find sustainable solutions to fight their consequences.

If such solutions for sustainable management of water resources cannot be communicated effectively, water problems may not only deteriorate into environmental crises, but also into political conflicts and even regional catastrophes which, in the last resort, will affect our First World societies in one way or another (*e.g*., migration, international relations, developmental policies, crisis intervention, etc.

To date, sanitary engineering has proposed a number of solutions, even if predominantly technical ones, *i.e*., solutions dealing with preserving water quality and reducing water consumption. The communicators involved in the complex dialogue process – from finding the solution and inventing the necessary technology to its local implementation and effective application – are institutions and organizations, on the one hand, local project workers and their addressees, on the other.

Thus, the attempt to analyze this complex dialogue process means taking systematically into account aspects of (i) *institutional communication* (mass media, aid organizations, local communication networks), (ii) *interpersonal communication* (face-to-face conversation, instructional discourse, behavior routines), and (iii), owing to the manifold cultural differences involved, *intercultural communication* (cross-cultural dialogue, cultural stereotypes, international relations). (see **Direct communication**)

The research project, sketched out as follows, aims at designing a theoretical framework for transdisciplinary analysis of the interface between the three main communication axes (institutional, intercultural, interpersonal), and establishing a model derived from that analysis for application "in the field", permitting implementation, harmonization, and optimization of communication patterns in local cross-cultural instruction processes, as well as in campaigning for environmental issues through critical media reports, public relations concepts, and the like.

The findings could, and should, be applied, for instance, to the field of sanitary engineering where the IGE/GS has established close co-operation with the École Inter-Etats d'Ingénieurs de l'Équipement Rural (EIER) and the Centre Régional pour l'Eau Potable et l'Assainissement (CREPA) in Burkina Faso, for francophone West Africa. Another important field of application would be the one of communication studies and public health where the Berne Institute has established contacts with the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies (CCMS) at the University of Natal, Durban, for anglophone eastern and southern Africa. Other projects deal with problems of sanitary engineering in Marocco. Taking all of these together should provide a broader picture of the issue in Africa and a very good starting point for further field studies.

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