We need info-structure

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In April 1998 a Unesco Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, "The Power of Culture" held in Stockholm, endorsed an action plan which contains key principles for media practitioners seeking a guiding beacon for their role in culture, and its role in a sustainable society.

"The Power of Culture" (www.unesco-sweden.org/Conference/Action_Plan.htm) recognised two key principles that inform media advocacy in Africa:

- Principle 7: New trends, particularly globalisation, link cultures ever more closely and enrich the interaction between them, but they may also be detrimental to creative diversity and to cultural pluralism; they make mutual respect all the more imperative.
- Principle 11: The defence of local and regional cultures threatened by cultures with a global reach must not transform the cultures thus affected into relics deprived of their own development dynamics.

The conference affirmed that:

- Effective participation in the information society and the mastery by everyone of information and communications technology constitute a significant dimension of any cultural policy; and
- Governments should endeavour to achieve closer partnerships with civil society in the design and implementation of cultural policies that are integrated into development strategies.

The conference recommended to member states that they adopt a broader vision of national cultural policy which fits locally and includes civic society participation as well as the media.

African media practitioners have recently expanded on these principles in the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, in developing the African Charter on Broadcasting (www.misa.org).

The communication rights of the information poor will not be enhanced simply by policies of infrastructure roll out, if the relationship between the institution and the audience isn't basically changed. So a committed media development activist takes a film to a village setting and powered by a diesel generator and projected on a floral bed sheet, the local population turns out to see one of the few audio visual projections of their lifetime. I don't wish to denigrate the sincere intent of this outreach activity, but in reality, next week, it's business as usual, with urban populations accessing cinemas and television and the rural folk watching the fire.

We must recognise the important limitations of policies that try to democratise information simply by expanding access to the same product. Such ideas need to be central to the development of the info-structure that is the means of access to information. Here it must be noted that while the idea of convergence at village level, and a computer terminal in every village, that provides access to broadcast content and the Internet is in theory technically achievable given the required resources, this reality is a good distance away.

Immediately we need to use broadcasting to serve the public interest, better than is the case now. Perhaps this will mean advocating for more accessible use of satellite technology for it has the reach that will be required to deliver content to the information poor. How will this be achieved in a media environment where profit not public interest is the driver of development and outreach?

Here in lies a great challenge for media activists. Exclusion is a passive put-down, but broadcast content also radiates active messages about who and who is not, important. This is broadcasting mobilised in support of economic inequality. Broadcast content is not neutral – it is a means of exclusion and a support of social and cultural privilege.

It seems to me that to be democratic and to develop and sustain social democracy, broadcasting must be a patchwork of content that reflects society, its diversity and its diversity of needs. A mix of brain food and entertainment that includes representation of the majority of people whose reality is not seen on TV.

We're all familiar with the horror stories about cultural programmes in history – the 'socialist realism' that meant glorification of Stalin, the Ministry of Propaganda that Goebbels wanted to be called the Ministry of Culture. No-one wants a re-run of that but sadly there are African governments who resist pressure to transform their national broadcast systems to ones where there is a diversity of voices and pluralism of ownership.

This isn't the only form of cultural control. Unless we are prepared to be completely passive in the face of Macdonaldisation and Readers Digestion, we have to declare what kinds of things we are against. And unless we want to be completely negative, we also have to say what kinds of things we are for. This can be difficult for people who have only known commercial or state radio. People don't wake up one morning and think "I am going to exercise my right to communicate today – I'll start a community radio station." This is a development dilemma with a long history, but again, existing media could play a significant role in developing a culture of tolerance, in giving life to the right to communicate and in the process building the kind of democracies that African people would be proud of. It goes without saying that the mature democracies of the world while they offer a framework for democracy, are not necessarily suitable to be grafted on to developing nations through aid programmes and international interventions.