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**Environmental and social injustices in East Africa: a critique of the modernization approach to environmental communication**

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**Abstract**

The existing environmental injustices in the world have often been linked to industrialisation and modernisation of nations. In a bid to develop and modernise their nations, East African governments have adopted neoclassical developmentalist ideals of ‘modernization’ and ‘capital investments’, which largely involve exploitation of natural and human resources. The consequence is rampant and severe environmental degradation and related impacts in the region. While environmental degradation impacts affect all people residing in the region, the poor are hit hardest since they do not have ways to deal with disasters; hence, it becomes an environmental and a social justice issue.

Although mass media are viewed as change agents and key players in the development agenda, and are often tasked to communicate information as widely as possible, these have adopted hierarchical and top down approaches to environmental and social justice issues and, in the process, helped to deepen the existing inequalities in society. From perspectives of Development Communication, this article critiques modernization discourses to development including: ‘Top-down experts of development’, ‘Blaming the victim’ and ‘Social Darwinism’.

The purpose is to demonstrate how the East African media deploy this framework to (mis) represent environmental issues leading to aggravated environmental and social injustices in these societies. The article argues for a ‘solution journalism approach’ to environmental communication, whereby media as advocates of development, focus more on the contextual factors within which environmental issues and problems transpire.

**Key words:** East Africa, Environmental and social injustices, Communication for Development, Modernisation discourses, Critical analysis. Solution journalism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Development has been constituted as an “increase in incomes, promoting equitable distribution of resources, eradication of social injustice and a free, safe and healthy environment, ensuring freedom of speech and establishing community centres for leisure and entertainment” (Melkote, 1991: 229). In this theorisation Melkote proposes that the ultimate goal of development constitutes “creating a better life for people in a given society”.

In contemporary uneven contexts, it has been argued that a better life for most people means, “meeting the basic needs such as food and water to maintain good health, affordable services available to everyone, being treated with dignity and respect” (Peet and Hartwick, 2009: 1), and a safe, healthy environment to live in. In their quests for development, East African governments operate within global capitalist systems that continuously rely on natural and human resources exploitation. Official development discourses reflect neoclassical developmentalist ideals of ‘modernization’ and ‘capital investments’, subjecting these resources to pressure to provide resources to meet national budgets, through several unsustainable economic activities.

Consequently, East Africa is currently underpinned with severe environmental degradation and related issues and impact. Critical concerns, according to Jjuuko and Prinsloo (2014), have mainly been with land degradation, deforestation, industrial water and air pollution, noise pollution, uncontrolled waste disposal, loss of biodiversity and deterioration of ecosystems and aquatic life. Jjuuko (2020), also notes that lack of access to good quality water for urban and rural inhabitants particularly in Tanzania and South Sudan is a major concern. These continue to experience drought and food insecurity due to low agricultural productivity, floods and other extreme weather conditions, leading to waterborne disease outbreaks.

The severity of environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources in the region are largely attributable to both local and foreign investors. For example, deforestation activities to

extract timber, as well as over-commercialisation of the fishery resource on Lake Victoria (and other lakes and rivers) are meant to broaden the national export sector and earn these countries foreign currency – leaving the poor local fisher folk and fishing communities (as an example) to mere poachers of their own country’s resources and to consuming fish by-products. See Image 1 below.



Image 1: A fishmonger at Kasenyi landing site on Lake Victoria (Uganda), is processing (frying) Nile perch fish wastes for sale. The fish carcasses are often dumped on the ground outside factories and sold cheaply to desperate traders who sun-dry or smoke them for sell in Ugandan food markets. People are attracted to the wastes by the low price and their potential to provide protein.

(Photo by Margaret Jjuuko, July 2010)

Similarly, encroaching on wetlands to construct industries and product processing and residential purposes, agriculture and other poorly executed economic activities, have had a negative consequence on the lives of the poor particularly those residing in high risk zones.<sup>i</sup>

While the future of the environment in EA can be argued to be in the hands of its people, the ever increasing population growth, currently approximated at 200 million people (World Population Review, 2019), coupled with inadequate livelihoods, significantly contribute to environmental degradation and high poverty levels (Nassanga, 2008).

Poverty occurs when people lack resources to produce goods and/or services to earn a decent standard of living. Lovemore (2001), relates poverty to the level of development of the immediate environment and argues that:

When communities are subjected to poverty, there is a vicious poverty-environment circle, which is difficult to break . . . Poverty and environmental degradation therefore are linked in a vicious circle in which people cannot afford to take care of the environment. (2001: 2-3)

That development is potentially powerful to move people and to affect and change them for ever (Peet and Hartwick, 2009), and that high levels of productivity and industrialisation equal to high literacy rates and longer life expectancy (Waisbord, 2001), are incongruous arguments, for the incapability to access basic, but essential goods and services leads to both physical and mental dearth.

While environmental degradation in EA impacts affect all people residing in the region, the poor are hit hardest since they do not have ways to deal with environmental disasters such as storm surges, floods and landslides. This then, I argue, becomes an issue of environmental and social justice owing to the unequal touchstones in a given society.

Researchers concerned with social justice (for example Hallows and Butler, 2003) have linked the history of industrialising development with the existing environmental injustices in the world. They argue that the proponents of modernisation approaches have failed to address development in relation to social justice and the existing inequalities in society.

Within the modernisation development discourse, conventional mass media, particularly radio and news articles, are viewed as primary movers of development agendas and are tasked with the role of ‘disseminating’ information as widely as possible (Tehrani, 1994). To some extent, interpersonal and indigenous channels of communication that are also relied upon to exchange information in some communities, are neglected (Jjuuko, 2015).

Even then, the limited representations of the plight of the poor and underprivileged in the news media is not without flaws – poor people only make news or feature in news and other media

reports during disastrous or catastrophic situations. The notion of ‘dissemination’ in itself, as this article argues later, connotes the top-down flow of information which does neither accommodate the voices of the underprivileged nor their living conditions and contexts.

Positioned as a critical media and communication studies inquiry, this article is driven by the following objectives:

1. To interrogate the taken-for-granted crucial role of the media in addressing developmental concerns with focus on environmental issues in EA;
2. To demonstrate how the EA media in their role of ‘disseminating’ information, have misrepresented social and environmental issues, thereby aggravating and deepening environmental and social injustices in society;
3. To make a case for the solution journalism approach in environmental journalism and communication that foregrounds the contextual factors within which environmental issues and problems occur.

## **2. Theoretical Perspectives**

### **2.1 Discourses of Development**

The conceptualisation of development as potentially powerful to enhance lives, is a controversial theory that emerged during the 1950s, coined in what is known as “the discourse of development” (Peet and Hartwick, 2009: 1), which connotes the system of statements made about development. Within this theorisation, it was assumed that there was exclusively one development model – the Western model – which underdeveloped societies needed to imitate. Several studies have since been carried out and theories developed to illuminate the notions of development and, to some extent, underdevelopment.

Reference has often been made to two different approaches to solving the problem of underdevelopment, particularly in Third World countries namely modernisation and dependency approaches. The modernisation approach to development identifies the problems of underdevelopment with “lack of capital, technology and information among populations” (Servaes, 1996: 31).

While the problems of poverty and deprivation largely a result of social inequalities in a given society, these are viewed (by modernists) as technical matters to be solved by technology and increased financial investments (Escobar, 1995). The dependency approach proposes that “the obstacles to development are not internal but external” (Servaes, 1996: 31).

In regards to communication (which is discussed as part of these development theories), two major branches of Communication for Development exist including ‘Diffusion of communication approach’ (rooted in the modernisation of information) and ‘Participatory communication approach’, situated in development theories that emerged as alternatives to the modernisation paradigm (Melkote, 2003). Within the Participatory communication approach, power inequalities are considered the underlying problem (Waisbord, 2001).

## **2.2 The modernization paradigm of development**

While all the above approaches seem relevant to this discussion, the focus here is limited to the modernisation approach to development communication – in relation to the approaches adopted by the East African media in reporting environmental and social in/justice in EA. Melkote (2003), locates the origin of the modernisation paradigm of development to the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War – where the problems of the post-war world were defined in terms of a lack of development or progress which is equivalent to that of Western nations.

It is underpinned by ideas of liberal capitalism, in which the definition of a modern world is constituted within the development frame normalised by Northern industrialised societies and their political and economical forms (Servaes, 1999). Through the Marshall Plan<sup>ii</sup>, the United States provided European nations with funding and technological solutions to spur economic growth and improve the well-being of European citizens (Melkote, 2003).

The architects of this plan regarded it as highly successful because it contributed to Europe’s quick recovery from the war. Because European nations responded so well to the infusion of funding and technology, development came to be regarded as a catch-up game (Marchant, 1988). It was believed that, with the right Western technology and economic support, the former European colonies, mainly the underdeveloped countries obliquely, would more efficiently improve their situations and become modernised like Western countries (Rostow, 1960).

Thus the modernisation approach became the reference framework through which certain industrial nations of the North set out to develop and transform former colonies, predominantly countries of the South (undeveloped or developing), to become more productive (Melkote and Steeves, 2001).

A central thesis in the modernisation perspective proposed a link between the mass production of goods and services with high incomes and improved infrastructure like roads, hospitals, schools and others (Berger, 2005). These were consequently assumed to trickle down to all members in a given society (Marchant, 1988; Berger, 2005).

The primary assumption of this thesis according to Fjes cited in Melkote (1991: 38) was that less developed nations would become fully modern and developed when they “closely resembled Western industrial nations in terms of political and economic behaviour and institutional attitudes towards technology and innovation, and social and psychic mobility”. The massive transfer of capital, ideology, technology and know-how and a worldwide Marshall Plan, was viewed by modernists as indubitable to achieve development (Servaes, 1999).

Similarly, technology was conceptualised as a crucial strategy to develop both agricultural and industrial sectors (Mody, 2003). Congruently, the transfer of knowledge from developed nations of the global north was considered vital to enable a modern society within to the global south and eastern nations (Melkote, 1991; Servaes, 1996). Gross National Products (GDP), literacy, industrial base and urbanisation, were viewed as quantifiable criteria for measuring progress in these nations (Servaes, 1999).

In his critical analysis of the rise and fall of development theory, Leys (1996) observes that governments, mainly former colonies in Africa and Asia, were charged with the control of capital inflows and outflows in addition to determining domestic interest rates as well as the exchange rates of their national currencies. Leys considered national economic planning as a natural extension of the modernisation thinking as were domestic and international arrangements to stabilise commodity prices.

International arrangements such as the Bretton Woods financial and trading regime of the 1950s emerged. They sought to facilitate national governments to manage their economies and achieve

set economic objectives to maximise growth and employment (Gendzier, 1985). Dooley et al. (2005: 8 – 10), explains that the Bretton Woods agreement, “set up a system of rules, institutions, and procedures to regulate the international monetary systems [including] the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), which today is part of the World Bank Group”.

These organisations went into operation in 1945 after the ratification of the agreement. Each ratifying nation was mandated to “adopt a monetary policy that maintained the exchange rate of its currency within a fixed value – plus or minus one percent – in terms of gold and the ability of the IMF to bridge temporary imbalances of payments” (Dooley et al., 2005: 10) . The Bretton Woods organisation pioneered a monetary order for the administration of monetary relations among sovereign nation-states (Leys, 1996).

The concept of development in the modernisation approach, thus, was understood as an immediate action-oriented reference framework for ex-colonies societies to accelerate their national economic growth in the international setting (Esteva, 1992). Modernisation tenets remained dominant in academe especially from 1945 –1965 and several governments and development agencies still subscribe to them (Servaes, 1999).

In many developing nations, especially in Africa and Asia, the ideas of the modernisation approach to development have been promoted by international development agencies and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and through policies such as the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPS). Leys (1996: 7), identified three assumptions underpinning development within the modernisation paradigm: “the goal of development is growth; the agent of development is the state, and the means of development were the micro economic policy instruments”.

Consequently, the work of international development agencies and institutions in development nations has been underpinned by a number of unrealistic assumptions that have been heavily critiqued in various academic debates. For example Leys (1996: 69), identified the following viewpoints:

1. Economic development is a discontinuous process of structural transformation;

2. National poverty in developing nations is argued to be self-perpetuating, with low-income countries caught in the vicious circle of poverty;
3. A 'big push' or 'critical minimum effort' is necessary to break out of the 'low-level equilibrium trap' and achieve self-sustaining growth;
4. While the 'big push' requires many inputs, its single most important ingredient is a massive increase in the ratio of investment capital to national income; and,
5. Development entails industrialisation, which, by choice or necessity, will concentrate on satisfying the home market for manufacturers by substituting for imports.

Coupled with the above is the idea that puts the state as the main framework of reference for developmental endeavours and the market as the most appropriate strategy and solution (Servaes, 1999) as well as the assumption that development is a result of internal backwardness in the affected Third World countries which has been widely critiqued. (Mansell and When, 1998).

In the modernisation framework, the world economy is understood as consisting of core (semi-periphery) and periphery. DeWitt and Harnandez (2003), identified the core states as the United States, Japan and the countries in Western Europe, while Brazil, Russia, China, Mexico, India, South Africa (to some extent) and others are semi-peripheral states; while the periphery (the poorest of the poor) are represented by such states as Haiti, Bangladesh, Honduras and African countries.

They further noted that competition is the basic economic relationship between core states and that the relationship between the core and non-core states is economic domination (DeWitt and Harnandez, 2003). Characteristic of the modernisation process is the assumption that development initiatives should be expert-driven. Such experts, usually from Northern countries or the capital cities of Third World nations (the core), are assumed to address the problems of the South or the rural areas (the periphery).

This form of modernisation according to Mody (2003) was planned under state technocrats in the capital cities of the concerned countries under the guidance of foreign experts from the developed world. The beneficiaries of these planned projects, usually the rural dwellers would

only know about the upcoming development when government technocrats from the city turn up to assess the project locations (Mody, 2003).

It has also been argued that many developing countries increased their dependence on foreign machinery, technology and capital resulting from the tied-aid nature of the modernisation paradigm (Gomez, 1997). Various problems associated with 'foreign aid' arose in many developing countries particularly the colonies of Africa.

Among the contentions was the argument while these plans were intended to increase rural productivity and to transfer under-utilised labour out of agriculture (as an example) for the global south, they were written by development experts from the North – who barely know the context (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). The shared vision that informs such projects has been criticised. Esteva (1992: 9), for example, argues that “the industrial mode of production . . . becomes the definition of the terminal stage of a non-linear way of social evolution”.

Many examples of development projects informed by the discourse of modernisation emerge from the field of agriculture, which is an integral part of most Third World economies. In EA, the modernisation development model is apparent in the efforts solve the problems of poverty and food insecurity, where, according to Babikwa (2003), the emphasis is put on intensifying the use of external inputs such as chemical fertilisers, agrochemicals and genetically modified (GMOs) seeds.

While the promoters of these innovations had good intentions, many critics (for example Conway and Barbier, 1990; Pretty, 1995; McDougall, 1990) link the extensive use of fertilizers and pest control chemicals, to environmental degradation through the contamination of water, food, fodder and the atmosphere and, at times, leading to an increase in chemically-resistant pests, diseases and weeds (Conway and Barbier, 1990). Concern has also been made to misuse of water leading to depletion of ground water, waterlogging and salinity in some places (Pretty, 1995; Pal, 1997).

Another major contention in the modernisation thesis is that human happiness is relative and synonymous with economic rationality and growth as determined by the economic and political elite in a given society.

Latouche (1992), cited in Melkote and Steeves (2001: 154), argues that higher standards of living computed by “indicators such as per capita income, per capita consumption of resources and gross national products” is an unreasonable prejudice since the “well-being of an individual or community includes both material and non-material aspects of life” and not “maximum material consumption”.

Clearly, this economist and technicist view of development can be argued to reduce poor people or the less privileged as part of the problem – whose ways of life (including their cultures and attitudes) need to be improved to the levels of those in the most developed nations, which are viewed as acceptable standards to measuring development.

### **2.3 Communication for Development in the Modernisation Paradigm**

The modernisation paradigm, and to some extent the dependency paradigm,<sup>iii</sup> presents communication as a key instrument to address the issues of underdevelopment in the Third world countries by changing people’s behaviours and attitudes (Rogers, 1983). According to Lerner and Nelson (1977: 107), development communication is fundamental to social transformation from the “traditional” to the “modern” society. This view positioned the concept of Development Communication (and later Communication for Development) as a key framework to interpret the issues related to economic growth and development, particularly in Third World nations (Melkote and Steeves, 2001).

Thus, Communication for Development (C4D) aims at fostering change in people’s attitudes and behaviour, to intensify their participation in the development process – through messages communicated via interpersonal and mass media channels to engage, motivate and sensitize the populace on development programmes (Servaes, 1999). C4D is conceived in terms of the assumed powerful effects of the mass media, notably the hypodermic needle, social diffusion and magic bullet theories adopted by communication experts such as Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, Walt Rostow and Everett Rogers during the 1950s (Waisbord, 2001). Waisbord further observed that the mass media were conceptualised as imperative agents in disseminating critical modernisation information – a role that is still mandated to mass media to date.

The diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers 1983), is a powerful theory in the modernisation paradigm – which was widely applied in most Third World nations to support ‘development’ by “informing the populations about the development projects, illustrating their advantages and recommending that they be supported” (Servaes, 1996: 133).

In this model, the communicative process is conceptualised as a linear, sender (of message) to receiver (S-M-R) process. Here, communication strategies are formulated by ‘experts’ (government echelons, extension workers and opinion leaders at the local level) and then channelled to the populace for this is conceptualised as mass media (Servaes, 1996; also see Melkote and Steeves, 2001).

Rogers’ model has informed development communication approaches in developing nations for decades, and according to Melkote (1991: 34), it has become the “blueprint for communication activities in development”. Rogers (1983), describes development communication as process where ideas are transferred (through communication) from a source to receivers with the intention to change their behaviour – with an understanding that the source desires to alter the receivers’ knowledge of a certain idea and their attitudes toward the new idea or simply adopt and embrace the idea as part of their everyday behaviour.

Rogers further argues that the diffusion of information takes time and he proposes five stages through which innovation adoption may occur: “awareness, knowledge and interest, decision, trial, and adoption/rejection” (1983: 89). Here, populations are divided into different groups depending on their propensity to incorporate innovations and their timing in adopting them.

Rogers argues that society has early adopters, opinion leaders and late adopters (1983) early adopters and opinion leaders are deployed alongside the media to spread ideas and innovations. This is described as the two step flow model of media effect, which foregrounds opinion leaders as key players in the diffusion and dissemination of modernisation ideas amongst the citizens (Servaes, 1996). In Rogers’ view, the mass media are “magic multiplier[s] for development” (1983: 226). His views on development reflect a transmission bias similar to that of Lerner and Schramm, who were highly influential in Communication for Development. As a consequence of Lerner, Rogers and Schramm’s theorising of the concept of development communication,

International communication experts (mainly from western nations) and their counterparts from the peripherals (Third World nations), introduced Communication for Development projects through massive information and communication technologies to promote modernisation.

Thus, mass media including newspapers, radio and television, became both channels and indicators of modernisation and essential partners for the effectiveness of development communication interventions (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). As such, the numbers of radio, television and newspapers, and the figures on the consumption of news products, were accepted as indicators of modernity (Melkote, 1991).

Research (for example research conducted by UNESCO), established that countries where people were more exposed to mass media, registered a higher adoption of modernisation and development ideas (Melkote, 1991). Berger (1992: 15), argued, however, that while the modernisation paradigm contributed to the growth of media institutions as “carrier(s) of modernity to transform the economy by means of technology”, it also introduced the “modern world view”, across a diversity of channels, where modernisation does no longer dependent upon any direct connection with the process of technological production (43).

Within the modernisation framework, communication is further understood as a multifaceted system that is capable of fulfilling certain social functions such as providing information, entertainment, education, political information and other forms of mobilising the citizenry (Servaes, 1999; Melkote and Steeves, 2001). In Third World <sup>iv</sup> countries, thus, the mass media were identified as able to serve as agents and indices of modernisation in their various countries (Boafo, 1993; Nwafo Nwanko, 1995). For example, in all the 6 countries of EA (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda), the public service broadcasters (radio and television) have been mandated to perform a developmental role through educational broadcasting programmes. The most distinguishable aspect within the Development Communication models is the conviction that the relationship between education and the mass media can transform Third World populations to move out of their traditional values and cultures and embrace western values and practices (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). Following independence, many African governments endorsed the diffusion of information model as

appropriate. The public broadcasting services were highly centralised, were usually based in the capital and operated within the ‘sender-receiver’ model.

### **3. Material and Methods**

The study mainly draws on secondary data, accessed through desk research – including a rigorous review of the works of key theorists and commentators in the fields of development, development communication, and media and environmental studies<sup>v</sup>. It is also informed by the author’s experiences as a former environmental broadcast journalist in Uganda, as well as her previous research project (2008 - 2012) on media’s representation and construction of environmental crises on Lake Victoria have informed this work (see Jjuuko and Prinsloo, 2014; Jjuuko, 2015a; and Jjuuko, 2015b).

The analysis takes off from the Communication for Development paradigm to critique the discourses of development in relation to the current trajectories of environmental and a social injustice in EA. Reference is made to the three pillars employed in the modernisation approach to development namely: ‘*Top-down experts of development*’, ‘*blaming the victim*’ and ‘*Social Darwinism*’. The article commences with an overview of the theoretical foundations to clarify the key tenets and positions of the modernization paradigm to development.

This is proceeded by an explication of the notion of communication for development within the modernization paradigm. The results section constitutes the critique of the three discourses employed in the modernization approach to development communication introduced in the introduction. A pitch for ‘Solution Journalism’ as a useful approach in the coverage of environmental sustainability and environmental justice in EA forms the last part of the article.

### **4. Results**

To understand environmental and social injustices in relation to development communication as conceived in the modernisation perspective, the following section undertakes a critique of three specific discourses (also referred to as the three major pillars of development, see Melkote and Steeves, 2001) deployed as ‘truth’ to legitimise the modernisation approach to development. These are ‘Top-down Experts of Development’, ‘Blaming the Victim’ and ‘Social Darwinism’.

The critique is enabled by observations and illustrations of how the mainstream media in East Africa operate in this framework to report environmental issues, events and occurrences.

#### **4.1. Top-down experts of development**

The ‘Top-down Experts of Development’ discourse is an aspect of the diffusion model of the modernisation approach that assumes a fixed set of steps and perceives progress as linear (Leys, 1996).

The assumption that people are passive receivers of development information and/or innovations, mainly through the mass media as the prime movers of social development and social change initiatives (Chin, 2005), make communication flows hierarchical, one-way and from the top down to the bottom, thus the notion of ‘top-down’.

Here, mass media are regarded as a link between modernising practices and societal institutions, and they function as “watchdogs, policy makers and teachers for change and modernisation experts” (Banda, 2003: 110). While this model was rendered as reductive in North America before the 1950s (Mody, 2003), many Third World countries adopted its use during the 1950s and 1960s and, subsequently, the ‘magic bullet theory’ model of mass media effects informed their interventions (Melkote, 2003).

As such, conventional mass media, particularly radio and news articles, were (and are still) tasked to disseminate information as widely as possible (Tehrani, 1994) whilst interpersonal and indigenous channels of communication are neglected. Government officials, policy makers, subject-matter-specialists and extension agents (experts) would transmit messages on radio or pay visits to villages.

Such ‘messages’ applied a sender-receiver model and were generally geared towards the perceived problems of the time and place, which included family planning, proper farming methods, environmental conservation, good hygiene and nutrition, political mobilisation, among other developmental concerns. It was anticipated that the audiences would receive and therefore adopt these ‘developmental’ messages (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). Family planning communication projects in Africa and Asia, for example, entailed several activities for the women by the so called ‘experts’, who would determine the types of contraceptives to be used.

Little or no effort was done to explain the side effects of the contraceptives or to understand the backgrounds of these women. Overtly, mass media were perceived to have the capacity to push the ideas of modernisation into remote populations and influence them to part from their traditions, cultural values and local life styles and behaviours – and replace them with the ways of life from the industrialised societies (Mody, 1991). Obviously, proponents of the ‘Top-down’ approach of the diffusion model of development communication, assume that the strengths of the mass media was firm in a one-way, top-down, simultaneous and widespread transmission of information on new innovations, particularly those from abroad (Mody, 2003).

Despite the current technological advancements and the multiplicity of social media platforms, mass media in East Africa (and other developing nations) are still considered as ‘magic’ multipliers of developmental innovations and in communicating issues related to development, e.g. environment, health, agriculture, etc. For the most part, main stream media draw on the knowledge, experiences and voices of policy makers, administrators, politicians, researchers/scientists or subject-matter-specialists and extension workers/field workers to comment on the issues at hand, and thus advance official discourses on these matters and what should be done.

Undoubtedly, these voices dominate mass media platforms and narratives and are usually instructional and intimidating. For example, its common to hear politicians on public service broadcasters (national radio and televisions) proposing the same solution to environmental degradation and consequences or to protecting wetlands including the ‘eviction of the “encroachers”’ or instructing law enforcers to arrest and imprison the wrongdoers.

In the Ugandan scheme of things, the poor who, for example are growing food in wetlands for their subsistence, do not have any alternative – which, paradoxically, may include bribes for law enforcers to let them be. The rich and more powerful encroachers such as industrialists, often get way with environmental degradation practices. Practical examples in EA reveal that economic growth that mainly accrue from the natural resources, has, for the most part, resulted in a deepening inequality between the rich and the poor, making local elites more powerful and ‘untouchable’ with little or no concern for the less privileged majority.

‘Top down’ approaches in media discourse are very popular in environmental conservation media campaigns where the populace are instructed “*not to cut down trees*” without giving them alternative and realistic plans. For example agricultural scientists usually instruct farmers to adopt agroforestry (for fuel wood and fodder) through intercropping. While these species mature faster, the farmers who are instructed against cutting trees, are neither advised nor facilitated to cope while the trees matured.

A similar approach tend to apply to other forms of reporting and social structures and was also recognised as advantaging men over women, urban over rural and the educated over the non-literate (Escobar, 1995). In essence, the modernisation paradigm assumptions that the problems of Third World countries are a result of their internal backwardness and indigenous state of mind, propose that solutions have to be one-way from top to the bottom in terms of ideas and information flow.

#### **4.2. Blaming the victim**

Blaming the victim is a strategy employed by both elite people and policy-makers across the world to justify social injustices in society, by identifying flaws in the affected, particularly the poor ordinary people. Simply put, the abjectness amongst the poor in most Third World countries, are attributed to both their deficiencies in planning and inadequate information about social and economic aspects they require to liberate themselves (Sarvaes, 1999).

Useful examples in EA where the plight of slum dwellers is frequently blamed to the tenants are mainly found in Kenya and Uganda – in the suburbs and/or slums of Kibera, Dandora, Mathare, Kayole, Baba Ndogo, Fuata Nyayo, Kawangware in Kenya, and Kisenyi and Katanga in Uganda. Here, the poor are habitually represented as illiterate or semi-illiterate rural–urban migrants and are blamed for constructing shacks in gazetted areas and for dumping waste anyhow without any regard for the environment, among other misdemeanours. Meanwhile the relationship between the filthy slum conditions and poor urban planning – accompanied by a number of sectoral, outdated and generally poor developmental policies as well as the rampant corruption in these nations is ignored.

As Jjuuko (2020) argues, very few journalists have endeavoured to explain these relationships in the media reports, for the simple reason that the media conglomerates, who employ the journalists, also own the industries that are implicated in environmental degradation.

The discourse that constitutes the victim as blamable, argue Melkote and Steeves (2001), tends to forefront his/her collective backgrounds and then establishes the inadequacy as situated in the that person. They further contend that,

The victim blamer could thus criticise the social stresses that produced such defects, but turn a blind eye to the repeated onslaughts of the victimising social forces on the individual. (2001: 330)

Whilst the causes of environmental degradation in EA are diverse, the media tend to ignore or overlook social contexts such as the living conditions of the poor communities and the implications of commercialisation of natural resources and agricultural products (e.g. the fisheries resource in lakes and rivers, timber, floriculture and horticulture exports, etc.), consequently neglecting poverty as among the causes of environmental degradation in the country (Nassanga, 2008).

More so, the East African media tend to shift their focus from the obvious causes of pollution (e.g. the industries located on the shores of water bodies) and instead blame the poorer fisher folk or subsistence farmers for the degradation of Lake Victoria (Jjuuko, 2015b) . Rather than focusing on the plight of the poor majority and the contributing factors to their predicaments, the media prefer to emphasise slogans of environmental management, conservation and protection without putting these issues in context.

For example, media reports on the rampant floods in Nairobi and Kampala cities, usually emerge as a consequence of tragic losses of lives after people have drowned or lost property and, typically, ‘blame the victims’. These either ‘persisted’, ‘refused to move’ or ‘kept deaf ears’ to scientific warnings. Ryan, cited in Melkote and Steeves (2001: 331), crisply put: “Blaming the victim is a brilliant ideology to justify a perverse form of social action designed to change not society, but rather society’s victim”.

### 4.3. Social Darwinism

‘Social Darwinism’, is a term theorised by Charles Darwin (1859) to explain the origin and evolution of species. In his opinion, the biological organisms had progressed from simpler forms thus their evolution was unilinear - toward more complex forms (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). Darwin’s theory was applied in social systems change in a radical manner to explain the survival of the fittest in the social arena (Servaes, 1996). Theorists such as Herbert Spencer and William Sumner, cited in Melkote and Steeves (2001), believed that outside or government interventions to address issues regarding the poor would not yield any results since they would be hindering individual choices and rights hence a disequilibrium in a natural course of events.

They denounced “any state-enforced effort to achieve equality, even equality of opportunity, because evolution depended on its force of inequality” (Melkote and Steeves, 2001: 330). Ironically, these theorists abhorred state-funded education, regulation of housing conditions and the protection of the consumer against dangers and deception and laws and policies.

Despite their little concern for social equality and justice, Social Darwinism advocates touches on a critical concern of poor laws that have created double standards in many developing countries. Examples of such poor laws in East Africa include those meant to alleviate or eradicate poverty – that are also tied with political manipulation of citizens, corruption and embezzlement of public funds, e.g. in Uganda and Tanzania.

What becomes evident in the above statement is that ‘Social Darwinism’ conveniently shores up capitalist interests in Third World countries in relation to justifying the modernisation approach to economic development and growth, making it part of the discourse informing the development agenda. Third World governments, for example, are arguably underpinned by social and economic injustices amongst their citizens (Melkote and Steeves, 2001), manifested in the unequal and unfair distribution and allocation of not only the national cake, but also opportunities in education and health, among other socio-political and economic consequences.

It is common in many African nations to find millions of people starving despite the firm economic base of their nations, derived from natural or mineral resources. West Africa, for example, is well known for its rich endowment in gold, tin and iron ore; northern Africa

particularly the Sudan, Mali and Ethiopia, South Sudan (which is now part of East Africa) are also rich in oil and gold, whereas other countries of the continent such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda (of recent), Zambia, Burkina Faso and South Africa, have considerable potential in oil, gold and other mineral resources (Okigbo, 1995). South Africa alone, for example, has been recorded to possess 84% of the world's total reserve base of the platinum minerals (Mineral Commodity Summaries, 1993: 130).

The above nations provide numerous examples and cases related to environmental and social injustices – the poorest, the hungry, the homeless and the deprived. In East Africa, environmental degradation and natural resources depletion are to a large extent attributable to both local and foreign investors. As discussed earlier in this article, over-commercialisation of the fishery resource on Lake Victoria has reduced the local fisher folk and fishing communities to consuming fish by-products in addition to becoming hunted poachers of these resources.

On the Ugandan side of the lake the national army, UPDF, is directly in charge of protecting it from local fishers who, governmental officials claim, use illegal fishing methods – although even fishers with legal fishing gear are equally ‘harassed’ (Jjuuko, 2015a; Mudliar, 2018). While claims of illegal methods are irrefutable, it should be noted that local fishers resort to destructive methods in their struggle to survive, while competing with large commercial boats owned by investors, who also own the big fish processing factories along the lake's shores.

Consequently the so-called investors, prominent politicians and entrepreneurs, and, by extension foreign communities, are chiefly the beneficiaries of the lake's resources. In line with the current trends of globalisation, it has been noted that despite the wealthy natural resource-based potential for Africa, the continent only consumes a fraction of it (World Resources cited in Okigbo, 1995).

‘Social Darwinism’ as interpreted by the notion of ‘survival of the fittest’ has emerged in a number of economic reform programs undertaken by most countries in EA – which have accelerated poverty and put pressure on natural resources. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) for example, have resulted in lay-offs of induced early retirement and unemployment – forcing people to seek alternative survival activities or strategies, including extensive natural resource use and exploitation (Jjuuko and Prinsloo, 2014).

The majority of the rural people have gone into farming and forestry products harvesting, livestock keeping (on very small scale), hardwood carvings for sale to tourists, soft wood products and pottery activities, which use natural resources (Lovemore, 2001). Inadequate access to land is another major contribution to poverty and is further compounded by high population growth rates (Lovemore, 2001). Access to land resources is perceived to be critical in countries like Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, and to a lesser extent, Tanzania. In Rwanda, for example, land policies were reviewed with a view of land distribution or redistribution. At some point President Kagame, in his pursuit of social justice, physically redistributed land among the rural poor to address food insecurity.

While poor people are both victims and unwilling agents to environmental change, the relationship between poverty and the environment has not been given serious consideration and attention it deserves in the mass media (Jjuuko, 2020). In the current trajectory of media proliferation and social media platforms, and the resulting competition between these platforms, modes of ‘Social Darwinism’ have emerged in media reports ranging from urban migration, population explosion, poverty, environmental degradation consequences, and displacement of the poor – to issues related to powerful corporations and political manipulation, among others. These are (mis)represented without context and proper attribution (in mainstream media) – due to high-pitched competition to break news first, or, distorted in the context of social media (Jjuuko, 2020).

To this end, it can be argued that features of the above three discourses of development are still apparent in the development agendas of many Third World nations, where developmental planners continuously legitimise the oppression and human misery caused by social injustice and extreme inequality, through systematic and logical explanation of subcultures, i.e. groups of individuals who are doomed to be backward because of their cultural deficiencies (Melkote, 2016). Yet, recognition of people’s social, historical and cultural backgrounds, and indigenous knowledge, has been argued as central for development.

As Okigbo (1995: 8), argues, true development will occur when a society “remain true to itself, draw its ways of thought and action from, and set itself objectives consonant with its values and needs”. Rationalisation such as scientific knowledge transfer, as prescribed in the discourse of

the ‘Top-down approach of development’, has also been argued to legitimise people’s oppressions and to maintain the status quo within and between unequal social relations or societies, consequently suppressing or preventing change (Hamelink, 1995).

## 5. Conclusion

This article has critiqued the modernisation perspective of development, particularly its three pillars of development, ‘Top-down experts of development’, ‘Blaming the victim’ and ‘Social Darwinism’, and has, thus, demonstrated that modernists have failed to address the issues of development in relation to social justice and the existing inequalities in society mainly due to their sender-and media-centric top-down approaches. These approaches tend to remove people from the centre of the issues related to their well-being to loss of control over their lives and subsequently in the utilisation and management of natural resources. Over-obsession with mass media effects within this theorisation resulted in the perception of communication as something one does to another (Melkote and Steeves, 2001).

The above negates two crucial factors in relation to this discussion: First, people’s actions and behaviour towards the environment heavily depend on their various contexts and predispositions. Second, people’s responses to environmental concerns, is not only influenced by the nature of information they receive, but by the sense of it made in relation to their everyday lived experiences. In line with these theses, I posit that in reporting environmental issues particularly as they relate to social justice, media need to acknowledge the social contexts of those affected and seek to address their plights as well as the existing social inequalities within those contexts.

This approach draws from the notion of ‘Solution Journalism’ and engages in a deliberative interplay of situating a story, information or any environmental content in the social and cultural contexts guided by both people’s experiences and their practical reasoning (e.g. sources and audiences), all of which contribute to what O’Donoghue and Lotz-Sisitka (2006) termed as ‘reflexive deliberation’ or weighing-up of possibilities.

Solution journalism is a style of news reporting while responding to social issues within their contexts, as well as the problems themselves. The approach involves “‘identifying the root causes of a social problem; prominently highlight a response, or responses, to that problem; present

evidence of the impact of that response; and explain how and why the response is working, or not working” (Wikipedia.org, n.d.n.p).

While discussing the relationship between media, culture and the environment, Anderson (1997), underscored the need for journalists to understand that there is more to the world than patterns of events, whereby, events arise from the workings of dialogue and discursive realisations and practices which take place within socio-historical, political and cultural contexts. Hence, solution journalism approaches which can be argued to draw insights from the ‘participatory approach’ of development communication, stresses that information and innovations should be the prerogative of the targeted people or the affected usually in remote areas or at community level, rather than the experts or the elite at the top. This is in light of the fact that many existing environmental issues and problems in society are located within different circumstances and social dispositions, which, to a great extent, influence the way people interact with the environmental and how sense is made of related issues and problems.

Conclusively, it’s important to acknowledge that while economic growth and environmental protection are often seen as conflicting goals, nations should understand that economic development and growth can only happen and prosper within a healthy and secure environment including all its habitats. As Gunasena (2018) argues, environmental sustainability and prosperity can be achieved through well planned natural resource management geared at improving livelihoods while supporting ecosystems. Equally important, is an informed understanding of the natural and human interface at any geographical location and time.

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<sup>1</sup> High risk zones are areas that are likely or prone to impacts of environmental degradation e.g. floods and landslides.

<sup>1</sup> The plan was named after US Secretary of State (1947), George Marshall and it sought to rebuild and create a stronger foundation for the countries of Western Europe, and repelling communism to recover from the effects of World War II. George Marshall elaborated the administration's desire to aid European recovery (Allen Dulles, n.d.). Accessed at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAmarshallP.htm> on December 30, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> The 'Dependency theory' emerged as a critique of the modernisation paradigm and became prominent in academe from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s (see Servaes, 1999 for more details on the dependency theory).

<sup>1</sup> While 'North' and 'South' become the more politically correct terms to indicate the developed and developing nations, in this article I also use the terminologies of 'First/Third' as the theorists whose work I draw on tended to refer to First and Third world.

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