



VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

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THE
KARIBU
FOUNDATION

Founded in 1985, the Karibu Foundation is an independent foundation that supports voices from the Global South who provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms of power, distribution, and development.

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Agencia Latinoamericana
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The Latin American Information Agency (ALAI, for its Spanish acronym) is a communications organization committed to human rights, gender equality, and citizen participation in the development and public affairs of Latin America.

ALAI's work is dedicated to the democratization of communication as a basic condition of democratic life and social justice.

For more information, visit:
http://alainet.org/quienes-somos_en.phtml

Democratizing Communication for Latin American People's Integration

Latin American integration is a term that is often used when discussing various models of unity, political and economic sovereignty, and sustainable development between peoples and countries in the diverse and vibrant region. After a long history of colonization and control by foreign actors, a unified and integrated Latin America places particular emphasis on the rights of peoples and their social and political participation, and envisions a Latin America that reduces its dependency on, and alignment with, powers in the Global North. One mechanism towards and characteristic of such regional integration is access to democratic and independent media and communication sources.

In November 2013, representatives from regional peoples' rights organizations and movements, together with representatives of alternative, community and popular media networks from across Latin America, met in Ecuador in order to explore the question of communication and media as a tool for social struggle in the region. In this month's "Voices from the South," Sally Burch of the Latin American Information Agency (ALAI) discusses these meetings, the need to challenge social conformity, and the necessity of strengthening alternative regional information strategies in order to actualize a regional integration that is anchored in the rights and sovereignty of the Latin American people.

By: Sally Burch

Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI)

Although it is still the region in the world with the most unequal distribution of wealth, Latin America has been undergoing profound political and social changes in this century. Progressive governments have been elected in a number of countries, largely as a result of the social struggles in resistance to the structural adjustment policies applied in previous decades (which included privatization or budget cuts in

social services such as health and education, prioritizing payment of illegitimate foreign debt, or the negotiation of trade agreements that favour the developed economies at the expense of the needs of local populations).

Recent political changes in the region have indicated a new push towards Latin American regional integration. One of the main signs of this is the move from many Latin American countries to reinvent regional integration on a more sovereign basis, as expressed



Photo: Lecture at the Latin American Forum on Communication and Integration, November 5th, Quito

in initiatives such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) or the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

So far, this integration has been more political than economic. But the attempt to reduce dependency on and alignment with the Western powers has not failed to provoke a backlash from the Global North, including the 2009 military coup in Honduras (with clear US interference), new US military bases in Colombia, resumed operations of the US Fourth Naval Fleet in Latin American and Caribbean waters as of 2008 (coinciding with Brazil's discovery of offshore oil) and a media offensive to discredit progressive governments and regional integration initiatives.

Communication is Power

A number of social movements and alternative media from the region have also begun a renewed push towards Latin American integration, identifying it as key area for social action.

Integration, with emphasis on a bottom-up perspective aimed at people's participation and building mutual respect, along with peace

and cooperation among neighbouring peoples, would provide the needed challenge to rivalry between Latin American countries that has been fuelled for many decades under the "divide and rule" principle of colonizing powers.

The *Agencia Latinoamericana de Información* (ALAI – Latin American Information Agency) has been accompanying processes of social and political mobilization for more than three decades, feeding social movements and alternative media networks relevant information and analysis rarely available in the mainstream press. In addition, ALAI is providing support and training for people's organizations in developing their own communications policy and practice.

The focus on communication is based on the understanding that, today, communication strategies are a fundamental requisite to win any social conquest. And they will be needed to reach long-term regional integration.

While plural and diverse information sources are essential for participation in democratic life, the reality is that the powers-that-be that defend the neoliberal system (whether corporations, foreign governments or local elites) seek to

concentrate control over the media as a means of ensuring social conformity.

ALAI has therefore given priority – together with other media organizations and social movements – to policy work aimed at democratizing communication (including new laws to diversify media), and to creating alternative media networks so as to provide a counterbalance to the mainstream media.

Building a Forum

It is apparent that a much greater effort of inter-communication and cultural exchange among peoples in the region is required for these concerns to take root among the broader population and to challenge social conformity.

With this in mind, ALAI has been working in recent years with other media and organizations to promote an agenda of *communication for people's integration*. The latest initiative, organized with the support of the Karibu Foundation, was a regional meeting in Quito in early November 2013, where some 40 representatives of alternative and popular media, national and regional media networks, as well as regional networks of people's organizations from the rural, women's and trade union sectors, among others, came together to build consensus around the role of communication and media in the integration process.

Following three days of debate and discussion of proposals, an agreement emerged that integration can only become irreversible through

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Photo: Panel discussions at the Latin American Forum on Communication and Integration, November 5th, Quito

strong social participation with guarantees for human rights. Moreover, democratizing communication and information is crucial to ensure democratic debate around the ideas and cultural approaches that are to orientate the integration process.

One concrete example of such ideas is in **Bolivia** and **Ecuador**, who have taken the lead on the debate around *Sumak Kawsay* (good living) to both the regional and international scene. They have proposed it as an alternative to the dominant unsustainable model of development and unlimited economic growth that is threatening the planet's survival. Based on an indigenous world-view, *sumak kawsay* implies a simple life-style ensuring well-being, in harmony with the natural environment.

But how to translate this into public policy requires broad public debate, which the mainstream media – devoted to the consumer culture – is unlikely to prioritize. Thus, a concrete, democratic, and alternative communication strategy is needed.

The Road Ahead

One of the decisions from the meeting was to build a Forum on Communication for Integration, open to other media and social actors. Among its goals will be to formulate proposals on these issues to be presented to the intergovernmental integration bodies, such as UNASUR, since, despite its relevance, communication has as yet scarcely been broached in these official spaces.

It was also agreed to develop mechanisms to interconnect the internet platforms and content of the different participating media and to share training materials and programs. Furthermore, emphasis was given to the need to develop proposals on public policy and a social economy designed to sustain alternative and community media, which are now finding new legal and technical opportunities to expand in the region, but continue to face severe restraints in terms of resources to ensure their operation.

In the medium term, our goal is to strengthen an alternative communications matrix as a platform to promote people's participation in public debate in Latin America. This is required to overcome social injustice, and is needed in order for Latin America to seek its own path of development that is in harmony with its cultural heritage and natural environment.

More information:

To read the final statement and recommendations of the Nov 4-6 meetings of **ALAI** and the **Latin American Forum on Communication for Integration**, visit:

<http://alainet.org/active/68869>

