

Malmö was the start of an incredibly fulfilling journey for me

By Rasna Warah¹

I vividly remember that day in May of 2002 when Oscar Hemer, the head of the Communication for Development (ComDev) Program at Malmö University, sent me an email telling me that I had been selected for the Masters degree programme at the university. I was in my office in Nairobi, having had a particularly frustrating day, and contemplating whether a career in the United Nations was really worth the trouble. Oscar's email jolted me. I felt a rush of adrenaline followed by a sobering reality check. After having been accepted by several universities to do post-graduate degrees, I inevitably had to decline the offers because I simply couldn't raise the fees.

I wrote back asking Oscar how much the fee would be. He appeared surprised and replied promptly by explaining that there was no fee; I was part of a group selected by the university to participate in an online experiment to deliver post-graduate degrees through distance learning to international students. In other words, I had won a scholarship. Needless to say I was thrilled.

What followed was an incredibly fulfilling journey. Having waited more than 15 years to do a Master's degree, I decided that I was not going to let work or anything else get in the way of my dream. I quit my well-paid UN job to study full-time, a decision that few of my friends or relatives understood. As fate would have it, it was probably the best decision I made. My mother, who had become bed-ridden the following year after suffering a stroke, got my undivided attention while I tried to finish the course requirements and exams in between physiotherapy treatments and nursing duties.

I tried to read every book the course recommended. (Thank you Amazon – most books are still unavailable in Nairobi bookshops today.) I inhaled the genius of Manuel Castells's (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society* and the rebelliousness of Ivan Illich and Wolfgang Sachs in their essays in *The Development Dictionary* (1992) while trying to decipher this animal called "development theory". Being among the oldest in the class (I was 40 when I joined), I realised I was also among the most jaded and cynical, having worked in the development industry for most of my career, and having realised that a lot of this type of work was more hype than real work and entailed incredible amounts of wasteful spending by over-paid bureaucrats who really didn't care about helping the world's poor or bringing about "development" in so-called developing countries.. I sincerely hoped that my cynicism would not rub off on the young idealistic Swedish students in my class who were probably seeking a career in the development industry when they applied for the course.

Sometimes I think that in the Swedish tradition of social democracy, where all views are considered equally valid, as long as they remain just and egalitarian at their core, the class was exposed to contrarians and mavericks who in essence undermined the very concept of development. Why, for instance was Rahnema and Bawntree's (1997) *Post-Development Reader* included in the course's reading list? Was it possible for us to imagine a world without "development" as it is understood now? Was the idea of development, as Sachs noted, "a ruin in the intellectual landscape"? Was the provocateur Ivan Illich right when he referred to development as "planned poverty"?² If so, why were we studying Communication

for Development? And who put neo-Marxist readings such as those by Gustavo Esteva³ on the reading list? Were we being subversively trained to be sceptical of not just development theory but development practice as well?

As it turns out, my extensive readings of works by these celebrated but relatively unknown “outside-the-box” thinkers (they have still not achieved the fame of William Easterly or Dambisa Moyo) led me to also critically examine the business of development – and let us not kid ourselves, it is a business – which resulted in an anthology I edited called *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits* that was published in 2008. Though I did not mention Oscar and all the others who facilitated my dissident distance learning post-graduate studies in the "Acknowledgments" section of this book, I am eternally indebted to them for inspiring me to not only publish the book, but to seek a career in other fields, particularly writing and journalism. I now write a [weekly column](#) for Kenya's [Daily Nation](#) newspaper and have published three more books since then, including two on Somalia.⁴

My friends, colleagues and fellow students at Malmö have now moved on to bigger and better things since they completed the course and received their Master's degrees. Flor Enghel, an Argentinean filmmaker who was my classmate at ComDev, fell in love with Sweden and stayed back to edit the Malmö University web magazine *Glocal Times*, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. Flor has gone on to attain a PhD, a much cherished dream. Others have continued to do what they do best, and achieved much success in their respective careers. Meanwhile [Glocal Times](#) continues to be a platform for ComDev students and others to showcase their research in the field of communication for development and to pose provocative questions related to their areas of interest. I am honoured to have been among its contributors.

I wish we, the Class of 2002-2004 could meet again, like we did in Malmö and Stockholm in the summer of 2003, to say a big “tack” to the Swedish government that funded the course and to all of my colleagues and supervisors at Malmö University who proved to the world that it is possible to get a first-rate education online if the right portal is created (thanks Micke and team) and when there are enough checks and balances to ensure that students don't cheat or fall back on deadlines. It was an innovation that would later be replicated worldwide, particularly in countries where the cost of physically attending a university is prohibitive.

References

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² See his essay in Chapter 9 of *The Post-Development Reader*.

³ See his essay in Chapter 2 of *The Development Dictionary*.

⁴ Check out my books at www.rasnawarahbooks.com