BRINGING ELECTRICITY TO RURAL INDIA

NGOs’ challenges for a visual representation of energy development

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Abstract

In today’s Development environment, characterised by a scarcity of resources for projects and interventions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must fiercely compete for funds. This has led NGOs to adhere to the donor’s narrative, language and Neoliberal values – with storytelling assuming a prominent position – potentially creating stereotyping issues in their communication outputs – while also facing the contrasting forces of market, state and communities. This thesis focuses on the case-study of the Bijli project, an energy access initiative for rural villages in India, created by The Climate Group – an important actor in the field and the charity where the author of this thesis still works. After a quick analysis of how the energy issue has shaped development in India, this work uses the academic tools of Discourse Analysis and Representation to examine the issues of stereotypes and marginalisation in the video produced by The Climate Group at the end of the Bijli program. Then, the ‘lessons learned’ have been applied to the video script for a new, potential video for a similar project that The Climate Group is now developing. Finally, such empirical application has shown how the issues arisen in the analysis relate to the modern debate in the Communication for Development field and how these new partnerships both challenge and reinforce the existing power relationships in the current Neoliberal climate. A more participatory, inclusive model could help the Global North audience better understand the reality in which it wants to intervene, but at the same time state and market are two powerful, useful actors to bring a more equitable development.
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1. Introduction

Non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) action and survival depends on how much social and communication impact they are able to deliver with a limited amount of funding. In turn, such funds are provided by donors that see these NGOs as tools to advance the core messages that they want to spread to certain peoples. This means that NGOs always have at least two audiences – the donors, to whom they need to report their progress, and the recipients, which are both the objects and the subjects of the NGOs’ action. This duality means that NGOs’ communication is always on the brink of a difficult balance between being effective for the donors while respecting the recipients’ identity. This also means that NGOs always struggle between making an impact on the Global North audience and giving an honest representation of the Global South. Furthermore, NGOs must balance the conflicting forces of states, market and communities, in order to demonstrate their autonomy and effectiveness.

These conflicts are a general problem with broader implications. The Climate Group, the charity I work for as Multimedia Editor, is not exempt from having to address such a clash. This charity is an important actor in the field of Development applied to climate change, and it works with sub-national governments and international businesses to spur the ‘net-zero’ economy, which is the complete decarbonisation of all sectors of the society by 2050, envisioned in the climate Paris Agreement of 2015. Because of this work with large companies, Neoliberal discourse is embedded in a large part of The Climate Group’s identity.

This thesis will focus on two projects of The Climate Group because having worked with this organisation for three years, I have a unique access to its core messaging and an extended knowledge of its internal mechanisms and aim. At the same time, this access comes with some limitation, such as an unconscious positive bias towards an organisation I admire and I am still part of, and the resulting desire to protect its reputation – potentially limiting the depth of the analysis of the empirical material.
1.1 Aim and research questions

Through the analysis of a video produced by The Climate Group to highlight its work on a specific project in India, this thesis project wants to underline this struggle and learn how we can better communicate our messaging, keeping the difficult balance between the two audiences – if such equilibrium is even possible. Finally, this analysis will inform the pre-production of a new video for a similar project in Nepal, applying in practice the theoretical lesson learned.

To achieve the above aim, the thesis will focus on the following questions:

1) How has this Neoliberal approach shaped the narrative around the project itself?

2) What is the shape of a communication plan for the RE-energizing project that can take into account the modern debate on Communication for Development?

1.2 Background

At the time of writing, more than 65.3 million people – or one person in every 113 – are displaced from their homes due to conflict or persecution (Trends, 2016). The vast majority of these – 40.8 million – are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), people that have not crossed a border to find safety. Unlike refugees, they are on the run at home. While they may have fled for similar reasons, IDPs stay within their own country and remain under the protection of its government, even if that government is the reason for their displacement. As a result, these people are among the most vulnerable in the world. (UN, 2017)

However, war is not the only trigger for IDPs. In 2015 alone, 19.2 million people in 113 countries had to flee their homes due to natural disasters – the highest figure ever recorded by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre – and extreme weather conditions accounted for over 90% of this forced migration, particularly in India, China and Nepal. (IDMC, 2016)

Between 2014 and 2015, The Climate Group has developed the Bijli – Clean energy for all project (The Climate Group, 2017): based on rural Indian villages, the project has provided clean energy access to 65,000 people through solar off-grid systems. In addition, it
identified sustainable off-grid energy business models, addressed the challenges of scaling up clean energy solutions to benefit large numbers of people by developing viable financial mechanisms, and also helps Indian businesses and communities lead and benefit from the emerging global low carbon economy. (The Climate Group, 2017)

Even if these rural villagers in India were not “internally displaced”, there is a striking parallelism between how The Climate Group approached the issue of these Indian people and the frameworks put in place by the UN for IDPs. In fact, both groups need support at a broader level – such as the financial one, to ‘reconstruct’ their lives – and they need to have access to clean electricity to develop their community’s potential. In particular, The Climate Group’s project refuses a “top-down” approach, such as simply deploying hundreds of solar lanterns to these villagers, helping local businesses to develop a model that both help their communities and could be a pilot to scale-up this method.

This year, The Climate Group bid for a project similar to Bijli, called RE-EnERgizing futuREs – Renewable Energy access for communities in crisis, aimed to IDPs in Nepal caused by the earthquake that in April 2015 hit the region. Built on Bijli’s experience, the project shared the same approach to improve the lives of these communities – for instance, allowing children to study until late in the night while reducing pollution in the community – while helping them to ‘REstart’ their lives with a business model based on clean technology. Both projects focused on creating and sustaining local businesses to enhance IDP’s lives and rebuild not only their homes, but their society: it is clear here that The Climate Group adopted a Neoliberalist approach, in line with its mission of working with policymakers and businesses to spur a net-zero economy.

Therefore, this thesis project will analyse Bijli’s communications outputs, putting them in a Discourse Analysis framework. Based on this analysis, the paper will develop a communication plan for the RE-energizing project, using Bijli’s experience to craft a framework close to the academic standards of good practice in the field, but also deeply rooted in the reality. Departing from the specific plan for The Climate Group, the thesis will finally focus on the ‘lessons learned’ during this analysis, showing how difficult is for a NGO rooted in the Global North – in terms of location and audience – to be effective towards its main audience while avoiding stereotypies
and simplistic representations of the secondary audience of the recipients of their projects. To do so, the thesis will briefly explain how the “system of differences” we use to make sense of the world (Hall, 2013b, p.232; du Gay et al., 1997; cf. Ferdinand de Saussure’s arbitrariness of the linguistic sign), showing through the analysis of the Bijli video how it is virtually impossible that the encoded message will be decoded exactly as intended by the audience, and highlighting the risks that stereotypes can lead to marginalise the recipients of the projects – due to the socio-cultural power of the ‘discourse’ of representations (Hall, 2013a; Dogra, 2012) – by presenting them as needy and passive.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter analyses the concept of ‘Neoliberalism’ in the context of India’s development and modernization, and the main issues arising from its correlation to Development and Communication for Development.

2.1 Neoliberalism and post-Development

The Climate Group’s projects can be inscribed into the theoretical path of the work on “Development” – a highly unstable, ever-changing word. From the beginning of the ‘Cold War’ in 1947 until recently, Development has often been interpreted by practitioners with the optimistic view of raising the masses toward the Western idea of ‘modernity’. In turn, this goal was crafted in the Bretton Woods system (Pieterse, 2010, p.7) in 1944, the outcome of a deeply changing the new URSS and US superpowers were replacing the UK one. The system envisioned a post-war world focused primarily on economic growth – through structural reform, deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation – and industrialisation. In the Eighties, Neoliberalism reinforced this idea depicting the whole world as a global market: therefore, developing economies were not a ‘special case’ but part of a coherent, comprehensive mechanism encasing the whole world, an idea that resisted until August 1971, when the US ended the convertibility of the US dollar to gold. One of the main features of this theory is that to progress towards this line of modernity – engrained with
economic growth – developing countries had to rely not on the State but on the ‘invisible hand’ of the market.

However, more recently Post-development challenged this view (Pieterse, 2010, p.8) shifting the focus from economic growth to a more holistic kind of modernity. It is not an easy task to pin down what ‘modernity’ should look like in this new framework, since the concept itself of Development is highly problematized in this theoretical structure. In particular, Post-development criticizes Neoliberal supposed achievements, underlining its imperialist and colonialism strands (McEwan, 2009, p.27); on the contrary, it focuses on ‘culture’ and ‘representation’, two keys to understanding how contemporary NGOs’ communication can be effective while avoiding the perpetration of the Neoliberal focus on economic growth for a more human, local development.

Productivity and business-solving mentality are at the core of Neoliberalism. This is reflected also in the Communication for Development (C4D) field, which has assimilated such corporate language giving emphasis to every piece of information that can be measured in any way – numbers, data, but particularly a quantifiable “impact” both on the audience and on the recipients of the projects. However, as Florenzia Enghel points out, CD4 is a “paradoxical field of theory and practice” (2013, p.119), where not everything can be scientifically measured. Moreover, this corporate approach derives from a Neoliberalist approach to development – something that is often seen just as a Western tool to promote its agenda of a linear modernization of the countries, seen as new markets to explore, through information and innovation (Wilkins, 2008, p.1). However, a more recent ‘participatory development’ rejects such ‘top down’ approach for a more horizontal one, criticizing practitioners who still see participation “as a means toward an end, defined by the institution itself” rather than a comprehensive, empowering strategy to enable a discussion and share knowledge. (p.2).

2.2 India’s development and modernization

Modernization theory is deeply linked to the Neoliberal approach, since it is engraved in the “American globalism in the context of the cold war and decolonization
... evolved from a marriage of evolutionism and functionalism” (Pieterse, 2009, p.21) – with, once again, a focus on ‘rationalization’ and ‘industrialization’. This idea of moving forward from the ‘tradition’ starkly contrasts with the anti-colonialism ideas formed in the 1930-40s, when India tried to assert its right to develop itself without an Euro-centric model imposed by the colonisers, strongly supporting its own internal market (cf. ‘developmentalism’ in Wallerstein, 2005). Around the time of its independence in 1947, the country was following a nationalist way of development named after Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister. This approach focused on the construction of a socialist, democratic republic with a strong State intervention and regulation to transition from an agricultural state to an industrialised one – based on the so called “Bombay Plan” (Khan, 1987). This top-down model of development planning was declined in five-year plans where

industrialization and large dams were designed to glorify Western-style industrial modernity as the singular path to progress, thus perpetuating ideas about development introduced by the British and adopted by Indian nationalists (Sutoris, 2016, V)

Dams were the perfect mean to represent this type of masculine, ‘modern’, powerful idea of Development: they are big, made with concrete, and produce large amount of electricity to power industries – no matter the consequences for local people. Behind this idea there is a strong top-down approach, with the ‘experts’ who know what is better for their fellow citizens – and they know it better than the people who have lived there for generations.

However, in the mid-1960s such a socialist and Keynesian trajectory starts to decline, when the ruling party “attempted a pronounced shift away from the Nehruvian framework in the economic realm” with the decision of devaluing the Rupee and to push for a free market agenda (Ananth, 2005, p.47) – a project firmly opposed by Indira Gandhi. In the Seventies, India saw also the rise of its middle class, which was challenging the “import substitution model for industrialization” with the “integration of the Indian economy into the global market” (p.55). The aim – or better, the hope – was that the Indian capitalism would have been different from the Western one, based on the fact that its “indigenous capitalism” could take advantage of an “highly developed national market that goes back as far as the 17th century”
and that in the country, a rare occurrence in the history of development, citizens “had the right to vote well before capitalist institutions developed.” (Das, 2002)

This kind of development is based on the myth of private efficiency: this approach leaves out the focus on infrastructures, which don’t give economic return per se and therefore are not part of the mainstream narrative about energy. At the beginning of the Nineties, the world is witnessing “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukujama, 1989) and the beginning of what we will define ‘globalization’ – a world funded on the success of the liberal capitalism and ‘the free market’, whereas from a socio-political point of view it sees inclusive civic engagement through global civil society, new social movements and NGOs (cf. ‘NGOisation’ and the rise of private sector, entrepreneurs and philantrocapitalism). In India, this process reached its peak in July 1991, when after a severe economic crisis that shocked India the Finance Minister Manhoman Singh launched a “New Economic Policy” based on liberalization, privatization and globalization (Peet, 2011).

This emerging, urban, educated and English-speaking middle class – formed by about 10-15% of an extremely large population – moves along the lines drafted in the modernization blueprint: they now want lights, fridges, televisions and everything else their Western counterparts already have. Such an energy-intensive lifestyle, paired with a changing economic structure due to industrialization and a rapid urbanisation, means that India must quickly find energy to support its growth. The State then sees a stark contrast between the pre-modern villages and this idea of ‘progress’, represented by coal and steel, where modernisation is not only possible, but necessary to build a new ‘empire’. Today, coal represents 60% of India’s total installed power generation Capacity (Central Electricity Authority, 2017) while in the Fifties the State launched large scale projects such as dams (cf. Films Division of India documentaries “Power for Tomorrow”, 1951 and “Electricity in the Service of Man”, 1956) and, more recently, large solar plants – such as world’s largest plant in Kamuthi, Tamil Nadu). However, while the State is pushing for scaling up renewable energy, coal is still represented as a necessary mean for “Ensuring Energy Sufficiency for a New India” (Goyal, 2017).
However, it must be underlined that it is very different to operate as an agent of the ‘market’ in India, as opposed to a ‘charity’ – especially an international one. What the latter can do is really tightly controlled, and foreign influence/finance is really restricted by the government – more so than in most Global South countries.

2.3 NGOs audiences and representation

Today, many NGOs from the Global North face what Tina Wallace calls the “NGO dilemmas”, asking if they are “Trojan horses for global neoliberalism” (2009). In fact, they rely on donors’ funding and goodwill, and in turn these donors – often even part of the NGOs trustees or Chief Executive Officers – play a fundamental role in shaping the NGOs agenda. Increasingly, they also must work with states to navigate through the bureaucratic process of deploying a project in a certain area and receiving support. Therefore, the dilemma is how to merge the top-down approach of states and businesses with a more participatory, bottom-up model of the civil society – in a way that does not exclude new ideas and perspectives.

From a Communication for Development point of view, such a dilemma is exacerbated by the fact that while one of NGOs’ main activities lies in representing the recipients of their action, they also care about their own representation in front of their audience – once again, the donors. Since “representations do not simply represent facts but also constitute them,” (Dogra, 2012, p.1) NGOs carry a huge responsibility not only on disseminating their own messages, but also on shaping our ‘stock of knowledge’ with which we shape our world. In other words, since NGOs operate at the intersection of ‘market’ and ‘state’ in the current ‘neoliberal’ climate, they risk perpetuating rather than challenging their donors’ agenda.

As a consequence, when producing their messages NGOs must be careful not to spread messages that can be interpreted in both their audiences as offensive or detrimental to their own culture. Since audiences have their own specific culture and decoding system, videos created by NGOs for fundraising, agency or monitoring purposes are clearly directed to the wealthy Global North, with the aim of raising as much money as possible for a specific cause, to move public opinion towards it or to
assure donors their money had a measurable ‘impact’. To do so, such videos must then share a common code with the audience, to maximize its effects.

However, today different media are increasingly competing to win the attention of their audience in the Global North, which in turn has an ever-reducing attention span; therefore, such videos tend to be quite short and must quickly produce a powerful effect on the audience. As a direct consequence, a certain level of simplification is inevitable. (Dogra, 2012, p.137) The increasing competition for the scarce funds for Development, the importance of the public support on influencing aid budgets (Scott, 2014, p.173), the reproduction of human hierarchies and “marketization of humanitarian practice” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p.6) have made strategies of humanitarian communication fiercely embedded in the Global North socio-cultural context that generated them.

As outlined in the Introduction, the organization I work for is not exempt from these ‘dilemmas’. On the contrary, The Climate Group works specifically with businesses and sub-national governments to tackle climate change on a global scale. However, there is already an implicit choice on how to advance this goal: it does not engage with any political theme – from climate justice to poverty reduction – but it uses the current neoliberal landscape to deliver a “net-zero economy”. Therefore, in my daily tasks as a Multimedia Editor for The Climate Group, I tend to work closely with organizations that pursue the same goal with a very similar tone – in order to reinforce our common messaging for our very similar audiences. While this is common practice for any kind of communication, there is here the risk of closing our audience (and ourselves) in an echo-chamber that is not open to experimentation, both in terms of new media and ideas. For instance, as the responsible for our “Climate TV”, I have successfully produced video interviews with prominent CEOs and politicians to analyse how businesses and sub-national governments are implementing ‘green policies’. Since these interviews have been favourably received by our audience, members and donors, I used to reiterate the format in my daily tasks. However, once challenged with post-Development theories from this Communication for Development Master, I have started looking more deeply into the participatory approach, both revising the work done in the past by my organisation and trying to
use a more bottom-up approach in my future production. Such an approach has been not only appreciated by colleagues and donors, but even encouraged with the possibility to apply for public-facing projects where the recipients’ role on shaping the project was predominant.

However, while I have never experienced any type of communication pressure from donors or companies involved in our programs, it must be underlined that business plays an ambiguous role in the Development field. In its 2015 report (ICAI, Report 43 – May 2015) the UK aid watchdog, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, assessed as “amber-red” the work of the UK Department for International Development with businesses, finding that such collaboration was “little more than a means of promotion for the companies involved and a chance to increase their influence in policy debates.” (ICAI, 2015, p.18) Meanwhile, it would be naïve to dismiss business’ role in development just as self-promotion, when funds are so scarce in the field and some states and companies genuinely align their ethos with sustainability goals – often for both economic and moral reasons. The challenge, therefore, is to communicate these mutual goals keeping the NGO’s integrity: a possible solution to solve the ‘dilemma’ can come from the journalistic sphere, where the values of accountability, truth, accuracy and independence should guide the communication outputs – values that are not always applied in a world where competition for audiences and funds is fierce.

At the same time, there’s another distinction to be made. Even if DFID money are used to ‘open up markets’, it must be underlined that this kind of finance is pretty different from more purely philanthropic finance – like the one that sustained the Bijli project, from DPL. DFID want to promote economic development so that the UK can make money; DPL want to promote economic development so that we can reduce poverty, and because they know that handouts don’t work in the long-term.

2.4 The Development cast

To better understand how NGOs can improve their communication and solve the impasse of being at the intersection of ‘market’ and ‘state’, we must first understand how they represent their recipients. Characters represented in NGOs
communication are mainly children, a metaphor of the whole Global South depicted as in need, vulnerable, often represented from a higher position – another powerful metaphor for servitude. (Dogra, 2012, p.33-39; Pieterse, 1995, p.131) Children also appeal to our inner human nature, raising a universal sentiment of innocence opposed to the negative connotations of paternalism and under-development (Escobar, 2011): in particular, children generate biological responses of “parenting instincts of care and protection” (Manzo, 2008, p. 650). Functional to this framework is the ‘post NGO intervention’ framework, with an implicit or explicit gloomy “before” and a positive, bright “after”. (cf. “deliberate positivism” – Scott, 2014, p.149-153)

Parallel to this, the feminisation of Global South is reinforced through images of women. The wide use of such characters can be seen on a positive, feminist tone as the recognition of their central socio-economic role. (Dogra, 2012, p.39) However, it is important to underline how often women are represented just as mothers and not as individuals, which recalls the idea of Nature. In turn, this could be expanded to take out politics and history from famine or energy crisis, “projecting the women (and children) as a homogenously powerless group of innocent victims of problems that just ‘happen to be’.” (p.40) Motherhood also serves ‘oneness’ NGOs messaging appealing to the universal relationship between mother and child, while at the same time it underlines the ‘difference’ between the viewer in the Global South (who is not experiencing that crisis) and ‘them’, helping making sense of our world through this distinction (cf. Discourse Analysis in the next chapter).

The narrative of short-term, small-scale projects are often functional to the depiction of Global South as a place with poverty issues de-linked from any historic and political roots. (Dogra, 2012, p.87-92; cf. Pieterse, 2010, p.8) Focusing on the micro-level and basic needs such as food, water or – in the case of this thesis – energy access, the messaging reinforces the legitimacy to the NGOs intervention, which cannot be argued against. However, such micro-level often portrays a simplified version of the reality: for example, representing a man as ‘a peasant’ and therefore further reinforcing the existing power relations between Global North and South.
3. Methodology

The *Bijli* videos will be investigated through a visual exploration based on the Discourse analysis framework. To better understand such analysis, I will also briefly introduce the concept of representation and I will point out the risks of stereotyping people depicted in such videos.

3.1 Discourse Analysis and Representation

Texts are never neutral, and they always carry a cultural and political baggage. In fact, since the Eighties linguists have underlined how the structure of media texts and representations uncovers the hidden “assumptions and values that are wrapped up in the construction of even relatively simple grammar forms, such as headlines.” (Deacon et al., 2007, p.150). In turn, such assumptions and values form a wide system of relationships of power and authority that shape our society and our way of perceiving it – what French philosopher Michael Foucault defines as ‘discourse’, “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment … the production of knowledge through language.” (Hall, 2013a, p.29).

Discourse analysis is therefore deeply rooted in the specific historic context, conversely to Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic approach which aimed to analyse texts in an ‘objective’, scientific way. He analysed the sign dividing it into ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’, that is what we see (for example, the word ‘cat’) and what we mean (the small, domesticated mammal with soft fur, a short snout and retractile claws). In his approach, meaning is produced by the relationship between signifier and signified, a connection that is always arbitrary, and it is shaped by the difference between different signs – such as the linguistic signs ‘cat’ and ‘car’.

According to Saussure, this distinct binary opposition is what enable us to make sense of the world in a more efficient way, what he calls “a system of differences” – the differences between signifiers which signify (see Hall, 2013b, p.232). Consequently, representation is a ‘practice’ and all meanings are produced within history and culture. Therefore, a video about a charity project in India is not
just a way to show donors the work that has been done, to spread its core message and engage with the audience: it is part of a ‘system of representation’ that gives us a shared conceptual map to understand the objects we represent.

However, Foucault evolves this mechanistic system encompassing the fundamental relationship between knowledge and power. Consequently, this paper uses a constructionist approach to texts (Hall, 2013a, p.11), aiming to unveil what Roland Barthes defines as the level of ‘myth’, the underlying message behind what is just denoted on a first reading (p.24): he further expanded the distinction between signifier and signified, linking them to the concepts of ‘denotation’ (the first, descriptive level) and ‘connotation’ (which recalls broader, cultural themes) respectively. In other words, what is Bijli’s video communicating and what is effectively convening? What ‘codes’ has it broken or enhanced?

According to Stuart Hall, representation is “the production of meaning through language” (2013, p.14) – where the term ‘language’ is used in a wider sense that includes not just the written and spoken words, but all the systems that have a sign and a signifying system – such as the visual one. Representation is a crucial element of the so-called “circuit of culture” (du Gay et al., 1997), a theoretical framework composed of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation: in this structure things that exist in the world don’t have any fixed meaning per se, but it is we – our society, our culture – who make sense of them through this process. In this sense, culture is a practice of ‘giving and taking of meaning’ (Hall, 2013, xxvi) where the audience plays a very active role – a process of negotiation and construction of meaning.

3.2 Stereotypes

If we represent the world through the opposition between signifier and signified, this means that it is easy to exacerbate such opposition through the process of stereotyping – which is to “reduce people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature.” (Hall, 2013, p.247). Richard Dyer (1984) makes a further distinction between ‘typing’ and ‘stereotyping’: since we make sense of things in terms of some wider categories, types help us to ‘code’ the world into
‘roles’, membership of a particular group, personality type and so on. On the contrary, stereotyping “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’” (Hall, 2013b, p.247).

As Saussure has shown, differences and in particular binary oppositions are a very powerful tool to ‘make sense’ of the world. However, stereotypes carry this epistemological tool to the extreme, using a strategy of ‘splitting’ that divides what is considered as normal and acceptable from what is abnormal and unacceptable. The reference to the naturalness of this division is dangerous, because it masks the fact that all these differences are a cultural construct, and sets the practice of ‘closure’ and ‘exclusion’ in a game of hierarchies that recall Foucalt’s distinction between power and knowledge, and the ‘struggle for hegemony’ of the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci. Having the power to represent the ‘others’ in a certain way, post-humanitarian communication must deal with the risk of overlooking its intrinsic ethnocentrism.

Maria Eriksson Baaz (2005) further reinforces this point, underlying how in the practice of Development – where disparities and discriminations among Global North and South are really concrete – the main issue is the discourse of representation. From a post-colonial point of view we could say that the audience wants to reinforce the stereotype of depicting itself as ‘active’ and ‘effective’, as opposed to the ‘lazy’ and ‘unreliable’ depiction of the recipients of their action. On the other hand, with the spread of the “slacktivism” and today’s fast consumption of media, this artificial distinction tends to fade away: as Douzinas has shown, donors are equally a passive recipient of pre-packed solutions; they accept that “this part of the world is beyond redemption and philanthropy is a transient palliative.” (2007, p.21-22)

In his study on British INGOs, Dogra fiercely criticize this vision of a ‘uniform first world’, which is driven by the “growing professionalism and commercialisation of INGOs.” (2012, p.137) Such focus on ‘branding’ further simplifies the messages, with the audiences considered as “monolithic, uniform and homogeneous, treated as an a priori entity.” (p.145)
3.3 Limitations

The *Bijli* video will be analysed both on a visual and linguistic level, applying the methodology illustrated above to each scene of the film – ultimately, uncovering the Neoliberal messages behind it and putting them into the global Communication for Development discourse. However, as briefly underlined in the introduction, my role as an employee of The Climate Group could limit this analysis, steering it towards messaging I have worked for three years and in some case I have contributed to create; in a way, I am both observer and observed. From a more academic point of view, Discourse Analysis carries a similar duality: if, as we have seen, meaning is never fixed but is a constant negotiation, this can lead to a personal interpretation of the data that can be dismissed by another individual in a different context. Ultimately, another limitation could arise from the fact that is power relationships are an integral part of this methodology, I have lived my entire life in the Global North framework and this could lead to prejudices and biases.

4. The experience of *Bijli*

4.1 The *Bijli* video

To date, about 30% of India’s population – 77 million households or around 360 million people – lack adequate access to electricity (Karunakaran, 2016) and most have to rely on expensive and dirty kerosene lamps for lighting.

The *Bijli* program, which started in April 2013 building partnerships with local stakeholders in the off-grid rural electrification space, effectively run between 2014 and 2015 and was principally funded by the Dutch Postcode Lottery. Located in the Indian states of Maharashtra, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, the program connected 65,000 rural villagers to cheaper, cleaner and more reliable renewable energy sources – helping them to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously enhancing their lives.

In addition to providing access to suitable renewable solar energy to rural consumers, *Bijli* sought to identify sustainable off-grid energy business models,
address the challenges of scaling up clean energy solutions to benefit large numbers of people by developing viable financial mechanisms, and also help Indian businesses and communities lead and benefit from the emerging global low carbon economy.

Through the Bijli project, The Climate Group has identified several sustainable off-grid business models with high potential for scale up. Since debt financing has been found to be the primary unmet need in the off-grid sector, the charity is seeking to create a debt fund to enable flexible financing for the distributed renewable energy sector in India that will bridge the gap to mainstream financial institutions.

On the communication side, the Bijli project has produced two videos, web articles, blogs, and pictures. This thesis will focus on the final video of the project (The Climate Group, 2015), which was produced as part of the deliverables of the project in order to highlight its success.

4.1.a – Culture vs Nature

The video starts with a female voice-over, in English with an Indian accent, saying that “just as dawn sets in, imagine living in darkness with a gleaming light [coming] to your rescue.” The stark opposition between darkness and the salvific light is further visually reinforced by the fact the video starts with a black screen that, when the voice-over ends on the word ‘rescue’, reveals what is looks like the interior of a rural house – with a goat on the distance – thanks to a candle lighten up by the silhouette of what appears to be an Indian woman dressed with traditional clothes.

The opposition white/black, light/darkness is a polarization that carries meanings that go well beyond the simple electrification of a village: the opposition here is a deeper one between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, with the technology able to defeat the darkness. Historically, it was the ‘white man’ the one able to overcome nature through culture, whereas for ‘the others’ there was no distinction between the two terms. Therefore, such brief instance in the Bijli video could revamp the stereotype of the Global North seen as “urban” and “developed” and the Global South as “non-industrial, rural, agricultural, underdeveloped.” (Hall, 1992, p.277) The opposition nature/culture is further reinforced by the exotic bird sounds that compose the very first second of the video: the viewer has nothing to see on the
screen, which is completely black, therefore the sounds act on the Global North on a sub-conscious level – immediately transporting the audience to another place.

At the same time, the whole point of the video is to show how these people in rural India had no access to electricity, and thanks to The Climate Group’s project now they have it. Therefore, the rural setting is in some way inevitable, and the images of the video could be just merely descriptive rather than symbolic. This could explain the goat in the background, which is part of the daily lives of people in the region, rather than a further underlying message for what Stuart Hall defines “the spectacle of the ‘Other’.” (p.267) Since representation is not a static field, it is up to us and our specific codes to interpret and judge such images – another stark reminder of the complexity and ambivalence of images and language in general.

Linking back to the Indian idea of development highlighted in chapter 2, it is clear that this opposition between nature and culture reflects the broader opposition between a – literally – illuminated middle class in the cities and rural villagers. Electricity is never questioned: it is a necessary tool for ‘modernization’, and yet there are many underlying questions that are not answered. In fact, if rural villagers use dangerous kerosene to light their houses, what about the socio-cultural repercussions of this system? For example, in some villages there could be a complex economic system to supply such kerosene: what if this system cannot be ‘rewired’ into a cleaner one? Ultimately, the ‘diffusion of innovation’ model risks to carry a pro-innovation bias without taking into consideration the deep socio-cultural roots of the recipients of the project. At the same time, it must be underlined that villagers were perfectly able to choose to use the new solar system or not, as they saw fit. Because they were paying for the panels, it was very much their decision whether they thought it would be good for their family or not.

The opposition city/village is further strengthened by the visual journey taken by the batteries that then will power solar lamps in the areas of rural India involved in the Bijli project, sometimes almost with a ‘point of view’ shot. This cinematographic technique serves the purpose of highlighting the difficulty of such journey – which is the primary issue for which these people don’t have access to grid-electricity – but also reinforces the opposition between the electrified, ‘illuminated’ middle class and
the peasants. Not by chance the voiceover of the *Bijli* video reinforces how such villages are very far from the reach of ‘modernity’. There is clearly a “gap”, visualised by the lack of any electric device and modern mean of transport. Such real isolation is reinforced by a visual sense of distance also from the Global North audience, amplified through iconic shots of goats and cows, and semi-naked children roaming free in the village: this marks a powerful difference with the city landscape and children where the Global North audience lives. Such a “gap” is not only in the villagers’ lack of electricity, but also in them being late along the linear progression of modernity, as intended in the Neo-liberal approach.

Not by chance, the donors (in this case mainly the Dutch Postcode Lottery), focus on “social enterprises” to achieve their objective of bridging such a gap. The stress on “trying out different business models” is also clearly derived from the Neo-liberal approach, visually reinforced by men stocking up the batteries and installing solar panels on the village’s roofs. It is also interesting to note that the video reinforces the stereotypes where the woman is seen cooking on a cook stove, while entrepreneurship is exclusively for men. On the other hand, it can be argued that in today’s capitalistic system, teaching these people new entrepreneurial skills means also making them less dependent on the donors, while the representation of men’s and women’s roles could be just descriptive of the status quo.

The video then describes the areas where the project has taken place, putting them on a stylized map: now the ‘distance’, which is necessary to move the Global North audience towards acting, is in some way filled or at least made less blurry. We are not anymore in our own, imaginary India: these are real people, in real places, shown on a map.

A sub-set of this opposition is the one between cities and villages. Even if cities are never directly represented in the video, they are somehow in the background – at least as an implicit comparison with the way of living of rural villagers. Such an opposition, as we have seen with the infantilisation process, serves the purpose to advance the creation of a new, ‘electrified’ Indian citizen who can then develop an indigenous way of looking at ‘modernity’. At the same time, this is functional also for
the Neoliberalist, Global North audience that wants to solve this opposition introducing in the local market its values and economic support.

An example of this is the interview with Mr Palass Kumar Gayel, who speaks in his own language: this is significant because it adds a layer of authenticity to the script, reminding the Global North that these villagers are geographically, linguistically and culturally distant from them. A stark reminder of this is the back of a cow in front of Mr Gayel, who is himself set in a rural environment with some clothes hanging on a rope to dry. However, the setting is an “ideal” village more than a real one, since no explanation is given on what village, or even what area, we are now.

4.1.b – Men vs Women

The role of women in rural India is exemplified by the interview to Mr Gopal Ghosh, presented as the founder of the “BGMS group”, and located in the Village Bagnan, West Bengal. Mr Gosh speaks in a hesitant English, often looking behind the camera, and his body language seems to suggest he is reading from some sort of autocue. At the same time, his left hand is placed on a solar panel – which dominates two-thirds of the shot – and he is almost smiling while talking: both signs of him being proud of his work.

It is interesting to note that the “BGMS” acronym is not explained in the lower-third or in the video. This is relevant if we consider that Bijli specifically worked to remove “the social and cultural discrimination associated with women” through

Bagnan Gramin Mahila Sammelan (BGMS), a women’s self-help group in Howrah, [which] has been working with local Bijli partner SwitchON for distribution of hand-held lanterns. The BGMS is a women operated micro-credit institution with 27,000 members and a turnover of US$1 million. (Pallassana, 2015)

It is possible to argue that given the short time span of the video, introducing the ‘women empowerment’ theme could have been in some way distracting for the main audience; nevertheless, it is also significant that The Climate Group chose as a speaker Mr Gosh, who jointly started BGMS with his wife, Ms Madhuri Ghosh (ATI, 2010). On a visual and conceptual point of view, having a woman talking about this project would have further underlined the empowerment theme. However, as The Climate Group states, the international charity “partnering with such institutions will
positively impact women’s empowerment in the region by generating additional income generating activities.” (Pallassana, 2015) Once again, the main focus is on the Neoliberal side of the narrative and, interestingly enough, on how NGOs can be a crucial gearwheel in the complex machinery of the Indian bureaucracy. ‘Market’, ‘state’ and ‘charities’ are creating new forms and partnerships that in some cases challenge existing power dynamics – for example, the work on women’s empowerment – but also help to reiterate stereotypes and the underlying message that disseminating electrification through business intervention and state support is the only way for India to proceed towards ‘modernity’.

Another example of the representation of the woman’s role is given by the scene where a solar lamp illuminates the silhouette of a woman. We do not see her face, but we do see the face of a little girl, probably her daughter, who is drawing something at the light of the solar lamp, near to some books. It is significant that this scene lasts for 9 seconds through two different shots: it is a direct reference to the “infantilisation and feminisation” visual tools described above by Dogra (2012, p.31). In other words, this is what the Global North audience wants to see: the impact they are having on the life of a small children, who can now play and – thanks to the reference of the books – even study at night. At the same time, Indian middle class could use infantilisation towards these villagers: rural villages can be seen as the ‘infancy’ of India, that is now moving towards a mature state at par of the Western world.

This infantilisation process can also be observed in the sequence when “Shilpi” comes to us delayed, after few frames on some children in semi-darkness – maybe her own children. She is also presented just as “housewife”, while the man speaking before her was given no title at all. Therefore, it is possible to argue that she represents the view the Global North, the Indian middle-class and its government have of the women in the region – a sort of remake of the Victorian image of the woman reduced to the roles of wife and “the angel in the house”. Not by chance, her words are preceded and followed by the images of children: she is the incarnation of the mother.
On a similar scene, a woman called Sunanda “can comfortably work late and go back home to enjoy a peaceful evening with her family.” Here we have a stark departure from the ideal of the housewife we have encountered before: Sunanda has a job outside her house, is independent and thanks to this project she can work even more. It is clear here the Neoliberal value of focussing on jobs and providing for themselves.

4.1.c – Business and community

The Bijli project wants to show how business can help solving the lack of electrification in rural India, an issue that has environmental and health consequences. The latter element is further reinforced by two sequences of a child reading a book in the semi-darkness, while Sabita Giri – another housewife – underlines how children can now study until late. She talks of the kerosene lamps she had to use before the intervention of the project. However, the focus is once again on the Neoliberal agenda: “we save lots of money,” she says, while the reference to the fact that kerosene lamps are very dangerous for the health of the villagers is somehow left to the interpretation of the Global North audience. Similarly, Histika Mohiti, presented as a “student”, says in her language that with the old kerosene lamp she had “so many problems that [she] was unable to study properly,” while now she “can study longer, and for a longer time,” because her “eyes are not irritated anymore.”

It is critical to underline that the core of the Bijli project outcomes was to help rural villagers not to rely on fossil fuels to generate electricity, therefore emitting less carbon dioxide; a direct consequence of this was also to safeguard their health, since the elements originated by such combustion are dangerous not only for the environment, but for humans too. As Krishnan Pallassana, former India Director of The Climate Group, proudly writes in one of his blogs about the project, “dirty and expensive kerosene is now a thing of the past, as are the medical fees that come with lung problems induced by burning fuel.” (2016) The health issue is directly linked to the economic one, the medical bill; at the same time, the economic issue is a real emergency in the area, where the Socio-Economic Caste Census survey (2015) indicates that 69% of the Indian populations, or 833 million people, live in rural areas
– and of these 75%, or 133.5 million families, earn less than US$78 a month. However, the cost/benefits are why people want to get solar panels and clean cookstoves in the area: money is precious and anything that will help them reduce their bills, they will do. By contrast, it is possible to explain the health benefits to local people, but there is the concrete risk they either don’t understand or don’t care. For example, the concept of being somewhat less likely to get lung cancer in twenty years is pretty meaningless compared to saving some money – which would mean they could buy food and not starve in the dry season in two months’ time.

The video shows a scene where some villagers are turning on the light at night, thanks to the systems provided by the Bijli program, while the voiceover focuses on the program being “a people’s initiative, contributes towards a better and healthier life for villagers.” However, the images do not match this claim: there is nothing in the images that suggests the health benefits of the project, and it is not clear why it should be a ‘people’s initiative’. We could interpret the latter claim as ‘an initiative that touches the lives of many people’, or ‘focussed on people’; nevertheless, we could also interpret it as a ‘participatory initiative, where the recipients can contribute to shape the project itself and its narrative’ – in which case this would be untrue, since no explanation is offered about how peoples appearing in the video have been selected.

Community is also at the heart of the scene where a very bright light illuminates the centre of what appears to be a barber saloon, while another light is illuminating some men around some fruits on a rug: once again, this fits the Neoliberal narrative that the project has helped these people to work more, enabling them to expand their markets and providing for their families. Not by chance the voiceover focuses on the value of “community”: but what kind of ‘community’ is the one depicted? It is one created by the exchange of goods or services. It is only with the subsequent scenes that this value is expanded beyond this business-oriented interpretation, with a long line of peoples carrying solar lamps in the night, ending all together in an open space. The images show them laughing, but not talking each other – and it is not clear why they gathered together. The final shot is a clearly staged one, with the solar lamps well-spaced and some children looking into the camera and
laughing/smiling. This serves the purpose of leaving the audience with a satisfying feeling of being able to “touch the lives” of these villagers, as the visual on top of the scene states, but it clearly fails to explain what a deeper sense of “community” looks like in that area. After showing the logo of the initiative and, most importantly, the one of the main donor and of the charity leading it, the video closes.

4.2 The dictatorship of the storytelling

The analysis of the video through the Visual Representation methodology has shown how difficult (if not impossible) is to encode a certain message and hoping that the audience will decode it exactly as we intended it originally, since often what is unspoken is relevant as much as what people say on camera. The task is further complicated by the fact we have here at least two audiences, the main one composed by the Global North and a second, almost invisible one made by the people represented in the video and the Global South in general.

In particular, the video has shown a pronounced focus on modernization seen as a linear progression and the creation or exploration of new markets, as highlighted by Wilkins (2008, p.1). Therefore, the video has explicitly made references to “attractive services” sold by locals as part of the program, with the underlying narrative of the journey of the batteries been rented to villagers. There is also a constant visual reference to markets and jobs, with interviewees stating they are able to work longer hours (cf. ‘Sunanda’ and ‘Rekha’) and the barber shop and the fruit seller in the final scenes of the video. As forecasted in the Background section of this thesis, in the analysis if the Bijli video we have seen that there is a huge push towards privatisation and personal enterprise (Harvey, 2005), with the universal access to energy seen not just as a basic human right, but also – and mostly – as the necessary prerequisite to have access to modern appliances, therefore expanding the Global North market. However, while the Bijli project explicitly fosters personal enterprise, the link with privatisation is somehow less clear – the projects were never taking public assets and dividing them up for the purposes of free-marketeering.

The analysis has also shown the importance of ‘representation’ not just as a mirror for reality, but actually for creating a new one (Dogra, 2012). In fact, each
scene has been analysed through a Neoliberal and Post-development lens, giving a wide range of interpretations that must be always taken into account when producing these kinds of videos. The most striking example of this is the recurrent representation of children and women in the video, which can be seen as the implementation from NGOs of a discursive strategy of “infantilisation and feminisation” of the Global South (Dogra, 2012, p.31). This could give the Global North audience reassurance about the fact their funds have been spent in an ‘impactful’ way – which is, ultimately, the core of such ‘wrap-up’ videos at the end of a project.

At the same time, these videos do not address the underlying issues about the social condition of women or the actual access to education for these children, but appeal to the universal human nature of protecting these children – a feeling that in extreme cases can lead to paternalism towards the “under-developed” villagers. This is in line with Bhattacharyya’s critique about the ‘unsustainability’ of programs devoted to the energy access issue (2012, p.260): the focus on measurable impact and creating new markets risks to represent the problems of these people like fixed in a bubble, carefully avoiding any political references (and not by chance many NGOs, and The Climate Group in particular, are explicitly apolitical). Many scholars have analysed such ‘crisis of developmentalism’ and recognise “the ecological limits to growth’ (Pieterse, 2010, p.28) which is a direct opposition to the Neoliberalist paradigm of markets constantly expanding. In turn, this has led to a ‘resistance’ in the Global South, which refuses the technological solving-problems approach and reclaims autonomy in expressing its own model of change.

Postcolonial approaches to Development build from this to challenge the dominant North-South relations, focusing in particular on the connection between people and space: as we have seen in the analysis of *Bijli*, the project is located in four villages in India – shown on a map – but then we have no idea of where the people interviewed live. These are, to use Edward Said words, “imagined geographies” (2014) – not in the sense they are ‘false’, but rather a space constructed through how we perceive these spaces. Since “Eurocentrism/western-centrism has been central to Development” (McEwan, 2009, p.29) the main audience of these videos in the Global
North tends to share the same conceptual map on how to ‘decode’ the images that come from the Global South.

This clearly shows that while Saussure’s semiotic approach has shown the mental processes of how we construct our reality through language, it is definitely through Foucault that we can understand how in this approach Development is about power. In particular, the *Bijli* video has shown a very limited participatory approach, confined to the women self-help group, while insisting that the Neoliberal approach to energy access brings only benefits to the people involved, and that scaling up the initiative these benefits will be felt even more by everyone. As we have seen above, such thinking is integrated in the Bretton Wood system (Pieterse, 2010, p.7) in the mid-Forties: however, in the Eighties and Nineties this idea of modernisation has produced an ‘impasse’ in Development (McEwan, 2009, p.98) linked to another ‘impasse’, this time political, caused by a United States economy weakened by the military spending and a decade of global recession. The idea, relevant to both our videos, is that if a country – or a community – works hard enough and opens itself to free trade, it will be able to solve its problems. The discontent arising from the fact that these promises never happened let to a ‘post-Washington’ consensus that focuses not just on land and goods, but on the relationships between social groups.

These relationships are not evident in the *Bijli* video, which focuses instead on showing how these villagers are all very positive about this new technology and the program itself – they often compare the ‘old’ way of life with the new, enhanced one: Palass Kumar Gayel says that “now our life has really improved,” Shilpi says that “now we can have a better life,” Sabita Giri says that “now children can study until late night.” This ‘before and after’ narrative follows the Neoliberalist approach of seeing the world as divided between a sort of – literally – ‘dark age’ before the programs it deploys, and the following ‘enlightenment’ thanks to new technology and market opportunities. This “heavier leaning on ‘positivity’ is in line with increasing corporatisation and marketisation of INGOs,” writes Nandita Dogra, (2012, p.191) suggesting that NGOs focus too much on appealing the ‘self’ of their audience rather than address endemic problems and our complex relationship with the ‘others’.
The way the Bijli villagers are represented for the Global North audience is also reflected by the fact that there is no mention of how have these people been chosen for the video. In our world of communication professionals, too often we have in mind who is paying for that specific film, what we want to achieve and how to make a big impact for our organization. In this frantic world, where we must compete for very scarce resources, the people whose stories we should narrate could easily become just a mere accident. There is, in other words, a dilemma originated by what we could call “the dictatorship of the storytelling”: since the donors are paying to produce these videos and to achieve a certain objective, the producer must encode the story in a way that is easily and unmistakably readable for the donors’ audience. Therefore, the storytelling of the videos must follow the above mentioned visual and cultural ‘rules’, forcing the producer to a level of simplification (Dogra, 2012, p.137) that could even led to stereotypes: in the Bijli’s video women are almost always just housewives, men are active on the commercial side of the project – even if the program explicitly worked with Bagnan Gramin Mahila Sammelan (BGMS), a women’s self-help group.

The risk here, as Michael Edward warns (2004, p.194), is to reiterate the Global North expectations on these people regardless of their actual social and economic situation. It is true that these videos are not documentaries, but in representing these villagers we should also ask ourselves how they would like to be portrayed, and in particular what is the most honest way to do so – striking a difficult balance between donors’ audience satisfaction and respect for the villagers’ depiction. In other words, “INGOs need to ask if it is right on their part to consider messages from the narrow aims of organisational survival and brand building,” (Dogra, 2012, p.193) while at the same time keeping in mind “there is no ideal form of humanitarian communication.” (Scott, 2014, p.138)

4.3 NGOs, state and market

As we have seen, the Bijli video exemplifies how organizations like The Climate Group operate in a contemporary, ‘Neoliberal’ climate between ‘market’, ‘state’ and ‘charity’. On one hand, NGOs fill a space left vacant by the first two actors, raising hopes in the Post-development debate that they can bring an alternative form of
development based on the plurality of bottom-up interests they carry on behalf of many social groups. On the other hand, critics argue that NGOs can be “reactionary in content, elitists in terms of the interests they represent … a mask for the interests of the dominant classes.” (Fernando & Heston, p.8-9, 1997) This duality is further represented by the fact NGOs are often non-for-profit – as The Climate Group – but still must compete for funds in a market that has clear Neoliberal values, which is a paradox for organisations that are hailed as a model of cooperation.

From a Communication for Development perspective, this means that the Global North audience – the one that funds the projects – cannot be completely challenged in its core values. In particular, the Bijli exemplifies how the main message is to facilitate the participation of the recipients to the market economy: there is no mention of any ‘alternative’ to this type of development. At the same time, the success of these projects is dependent on the collaboration with the federal government, leading to new form of partnerships that fluctuate between autonomy and collaboration. In other words, to be effective NGOs cannot be just another arm of a national state, following its agenda and bureaucracy. This contrast arises from the fact charities lie in the intersection between market and state on one hand, and communities on the other – two worlds with antithetical values. Therefore, the challenge is to work with the two powerful forces of market and state without losing autonomy. However, Bishwapriya Sanyal argues that such a quest “hurts the NGOs effectiveness instead of strengthening it,” (1997, p.21) and must integrate their bottom-up approach with the top-down, diffusion model of the market and state. A possible solution is the integration of each of these actors’ strengths: the state, with its large bureaucratic machinery, is better positioned to create the right policy environment to enable NGOs project to succeed; NGOs can reach audiences that are usually closed off to governments, and engage them from a bottom-up perspective; markets give projects an efficiency framework and are able to support them. (Sanyal, 1997, p.32)

However, it is true that the Bijli and RE-Energizing projects saw economics as a development tool, but there were several features which made this kind of development not completely ‘neoliberal’ in outlook. Firstly, there was sometimes still
subsidies in place to enable purchasing agreements, there were arrangements for non-cash payment systems, and there were explicit stimulus of cooperative rather than private enterprise.

In the next section, the thesis will try to apply this academic and empirical analysis on the production of a new video similar to the *Bijli* one.

## 5. RE-Energizing Futures

The Climate Group’s *RE-Energizing Futures* project focuses on market-based energy solutions to reduce energy poverty, while sustainably improving standards of living. Crucially, it also aims to use “renewable energy markets as a platform to create jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities” (The Climate Group, 2016b, p.5). It is clear from this continuous reference to ‘the market’ that the project follows a Neoliberalist approach. Furthermore, it aims to train its recipients with a series of ‘skills training’, so to “help displaced people generate income and create a secure future for themselves and their families.” (p.5) The focus on economics as a development tool is manifest.

Similarly to the *Bijli* initiative, the audience for this project is primarily the one defined by its funders, while the a second-tier audience is composed by governments and NGOs that would like to scale up the lessons learned in this pilot. Once again, there is no mention of the audience composed by the recipients and the Global South in general. In line with almost every NGOs objectives, the aim of the program is to achieve wide support and sympathy in the Global North audience – both to raise awareness on the issues it tackles, but also to be able to raise more funds to step up the project. In this perspective, The Climate Group’s extensive social media channels – particularly Twitter – could play a crucial role: this is relevant for our analysis also because social media allow the dissemination of short, engaging videos that can further improve the project’s penetration in the main audience, a powerful medium to convene the results of the program.

The *RE-Energizing* video should focus on the specific Nepalese case, but also show the dramatic scale of the problems faced by the world’s displaced communities,
while also highlighting – following the Neoliberal agenda – the opportunities created from empowering these people through creating a new, internal market for renewable energy. The focus must also be on climate change, since this is the core of The Climate Group’s messaging, showing how it is driving a global increase in migration and that tackling global warming would address one of the main root causes of such displacement.

The main concept that must come out from this communication is that “clean energy access is the single most powerful way to create long-term, sustainable improvements in the lives of displaced people” (p.31). This clear message can be justified with the Neoliberal view that universal energy access can create new markets for appliances and a Western, technology-orientated lifestyle – while at the same time creating drivers in this new market, such as the ‘skill trained’ people who can set up a business on solar limp like we have seen in the Bijli program.

In the Communication for Development field, NGOs are increasingly playing a role in shaping policies and civil society: according to Vandana Desai (2002, p.569), this is happening also because of their administrative flexibility – which is appealing for donors asking for structural reform and privatisation of the Development field. In the case of a video, this medium is never ‘neutral’, “having distinct class overtones in terms of ownership.” (Cook & Crang, 1995, p.70) The ownership is clearly owned by the Global North donors, who see NGOs as ‘service delivery’ not only of their funds, but also of new market policies. Once again, we see imbalanced power relationships – this time between donors and NGOs. After the recent donor-driven ‘explosion’ of NGOs in the last years (Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017), this imbalance is even more accentuated towards the need for NGOs to be ‘accountable’ (in a measurable way) to donors. Therefore, these videos risk to shift the focus towards NGOs desire to be seen as trustworthy partners for the private sector, in order to attract funds, consequently reiterating the power relationships in the ‘principal-agent market model’: these videos must show in a measurable way “how NGOs (the agent) are achieving the goals set out in their contract with the donor (the principal).” (p.135) The dominance of market-led values in the Communication for Development discourse has then been questioned by Post-development theorists, who focus instead on grassroots initiatives.
Communication for Development as an organic, monolithic tool used by Global North to advance its own idea of modernisation. Ultimately, the video script for the RE-energizing project wants to show that NGOs work can still be impartial, truth, reliable, transparent and truly representative of the issues addressed.

However, this implicit goal of new markets for appliances and a tech-oriented lifestyle can be counterbalanced by another interpretation: a goal of seeing energy as an enabler for other SDGs, and for basics like warmth, shelter and food production after disaster – rather than trying to make consumers out of people. As mentioned before with the distinction between DFID and DPL, effects and intentions of different types of donor money can vary hugely.

5.1 RE-energizing video script

Bearing in mind the lessons learned from the *Bijli* video, this thesis wants to show that a common ground must be found between the Neoliberal necessity of pushing for “rebuilding lives” through entrepreneurship, where communities lack access to electricity, and the Post-development need to give a fair representation of the people filmed – both for the Global North and the Global South audiences. One of the most striking issues of the *Bijli* video was the lack of direct participation from the villagers in the production of the video; even when the program directly worked with the women’s self-help group BGMS, this was not made explicit in the script. At the same time, it is clear that a promotional video about a project is different from a participatory one (White, 2003): the means of production are not owned by the community represented in the video, social change is directed from a top-down flown directly linked to the Neoliberal agenda of the donors, and there is no alternative space for alternative solutions to the issue or alternative themes coming up from the community.

Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to find a middle ground using some of the participatory techniques in this video. For instance, in the *Bijli* video there is no mention of how people have been chosen for the film, and why they chose to share their stories. A step further would be to engage with the communities reached by the
RE-Energizing project, for example handing over a questionnaire about how the project has been perceived, how it affected their life and also how much of an issue, in a scale that comprises many other problems in the camp, is energy access. However, according to World Bank’s data the total adult literacy rate is 57.4% in the country, while the 2011 National census lists 123 Nepalese languages spoken as a first language – therefore making very difficult any option with written questionnaires. A possible solution for this would be to engage with local personalities, organizing meetings where everyone in the camp could have the opportunity to participate shaping the video and highlighting their own priorities. However, this would lead to an increase on both timings and costing for the video, which should be absorbed by donors in advance. This issue could be avoided with a sort of ‘election’ of spokespeople that can then work with the video producer: however, a limitation of this approach is that this could lead to a reflection of the power structure already existing in the community – denying less-visible people their voice. A balance could be found asking for the intermediation of NGOs already working on the ground, who can indicate the top issues they have encountered in their work, and then The Climate Group could examine in depth the ones that are most relevant with this project.

In any case, whatever the approach, the most important concern for the video producer must be to make clear this step – how these themes have been selected, why The Climate Group has chosen a certain approach and in particular how the people in front of the camera have been selected. In a nation where gender issues stem directly from inequality and underdevelopment (Aguirre & Pietropaoli, 2008), it is crucial to explain the Global North audience why these people’s voice matter, and there is a moral imperative to highlight women’s opinion on the issues debated. A further step would be also to briefly explain why the video uses interviews as a communication tool for its main audience: a possible answer would be that this method, once made clear how the speakers have been chosen, is the most direct instrument to literally ‘give voice’ to the recipients of the project. Here, the main risk would be that IDPs reached by the project could reject it or have a strong, negative opinion about some of its aspects: how many donors and NGOs would be ready to take this risk? It is certainly true that the negative opinions could be easily edited out,
but that would defy the whole participatory approach and crucially it would not allow the whole Development community to learn from the – inevitable – errors that could happen during the execution of a project.

However, further on the issue that every woman seems to be described as a ‘housewife’, it must be noted that in most of the Bijli locations pretty much every woman is a housewife without another recognised occupation. Moreover, it was not The Climate Group saying they are a housewife, but that was their own description. Secondly, on the film showing the worlds of men and women being very separate, it is also true that in these areas men and women’s lives are led very separately: either it is possible to see men out in public, and the women stay home, or the men go to the fields and the women go to market – or vice versa. What it is almost never seen are men and women socialising together in public or as a community. Therefore, there is also an effect of a very gender-divided society – the rural South – confirming or perhaps reminding us of our stereotypes: in some ways, the effect goes in both directions.

Another issue to be avoided in the RE-Energizing is a simplistic ‘before and after’ narrative, which we have seen in part in the Bijli video. However, the whole point of most Development projects is improve the lives of its recipients – and crucially, to show it to their main audience. Nonetheless, the participatory elements drafted above could help dignifying these communities, not just representing them as hopeless without the intervention of the donors, but rather explaining the roots of their problems: in the case of Nepal, the displacement occurring in the zone is due not only to the recent earthquake that hit the country, but also to floods, droughts and food insecurity caused by climate change (Buckley, 2015). Putting this front and centre on the video, with also the help of an expert and of a quick ‘explainer’, would greatly benefit the objectivity of the film, giving it a broader – and very relevant for The Climate Group’s messaging – focus. At the same time, it would almost turn the table from a communication and emotional point of view: these people are suffering not because of their inability to cope with the Neoliberal paradigm, but because they are paying the price for the global increase of pollutants in the environment – an increase almost entirely driven by the Global North.
Another related issue to be tackled is how to represent daily life in the camp: even if it is necessary not to hide the hardness of it, a balance must be found on preserving the dignity of the IDPs and their resilience. Such equilibrium is not easy to find and it is at the core of these kind of videos, because the Global North audience wants to be sure the project they fund is ‘making the difference’ in an area where it really matters. For example, the Bijli video had a good balance on visually representing the villages, without indulging with the camera on the most simple and rural houses, and at the same time giving a fair representation of them. However, the Bijli video lacked in showing the sense of community, decisively separating the worlds of men, women, and children – visually linking the last two circles only in the mother-child sphere. It also showed a sort of ‘staged’ community in the last part of the video, where it is not clear why these people walked in the night to gather together in that specific place. On the contrary, the RE-Energizing should show all the potential participatory moments of its preparation, visually demonstrating the selection process for the spokespeople and, most importantly, the real sense of community that the project would help to unveil. A struggling community, for example, would be the perfect ‘equilibrium point’ because it would show the Global North audience the harshness of the issues tackled by IDPs, while also indicating their resilience and willingness to overcome them – something that would respect their own perception and the Global South audience. For example, the video could show how these people helped each other after a drought or a flood, telling their stories from an emotional point of view but also highlighting the pre-existent conditions that made recovery impossible despite of all their attempts.

This point leads us to the final point on how to effectively use storytelling, which we have seen as a powerful but risky tool in the analysis above. The use of personal stories seems a quick win for the video producer who aims at a Global North audience: it allows the latter to connect on an emotional level with the recipients of the project, it is easier to remember and it is also appealing both for media and social media. However, as we have seen before, there is the risk of reducing such stories to a stereotype and it can create an unfair balance of power between the viewer, who sits behind a screen and judge the lives that flow behind his eyes, and the peoples in front
of the camera, who tell their stories but do not know how they will be reconstructed and represented in a broader context. The above mentioned participatory approach can just address the first part of this issue, giving a fairly balanced content to be brought in front of the camera, but does not tackle the issues that can arise from a misleading representation and video-editing. A possible solution would be to extend the participatory approach to all phases of the video, but once again this would take time, money and a risk not many donors are willing to take. This is why the editorial control of the video producer is key: through a thorough analysis of the possibilities offered by the script, he could recognise the importance of striking a balance between the necessity of moving its Global North audience and fairly represent the people that have agreed to show their lives in front of his camera.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the Bijli video and the application of its main features on the RE-Energizing video script, this thesis has highlighted the difficulties of finding a balance between communicating in an effective way to the Neoliberal Global North audience while giving a fair representation of the Global South – in particular people in India and Nepal who lack energy access. An additional issue is the precarious equilibrium between state, market and NGOs in the current Neoliberal climate.

The thesis has shown the advantages and the risks of the Neoliberalist approach for this type of communication, starting with giving a background of the energy access issue in the context of rural villages in India and of IDPs in Nepal. This has given context to the urgency of acting on a global scale to solve this often overlooked but pressing problem, and introducing the solutions envisioned by The Climate Group’s projects Bijli and RE-Energizing Futures. The theoretical framework has focused on how the Neoliberalism lens has informed the video, both in its pre-production and in its execution, and how the Post-development discourse challenged its theoretical assumptions of productivity and business-solving attitude seen as solutions for a linear vision of Development. The thesis has then shown the dichotomy between the Global North audience, which is the main one for the videos analysed,
and the Global South one, which it represents and works with. This is a crucial point because, as detailed in the subsequent parts of the paper, the way NGOs represent Global South constructs the knowledge around it (see Dogra, 2012) – therefore helping shaping the identity of the people represented. To better portray the recipients of their projects, NGOs must use the communication tools of ‘difference’ and ‘oneness’, representing them both as distant and part of the same humanity: again, another dichotomy. Since each audience has its own decoding system, it is virtually impossible to encode a message that would be received in the same way by both audiences; moreover, in a world where communication is faster and faster, while the attention span is reducing dramatically, simplification is a powerful tool to convene messages – but it carries the risk of reducing people who portrays in terms of ‘typing’ and ‘stereotyping’ (such as for women, an issue analysed in the next paragraph). To better understand these points, the thesis has used the Discourse Analysis framework as a tool to examine the *Bijli* video and understand how it fits in the Neoliberal context. Through a Linguistics analysis, this framework has explained why we do need differences or binary oppositions to make sense of the world around us – to produce what Stuart Hall calls the ‘system of representation’ (2013b, p.232).

The thesis has then used these frameworks and communication tools to analyse in deep the *Bijli* video, underscoring how it makes use of the opposition light/darkness as a reflection of the antagonism between nature and culture – which is part one of the theoretical basis of Neoliberalism, in turn reflecting on the dichotomy urban/rural. The analysis also raised questions on women’s role and stereotypes, since the women represented in the video are just described as “housewives”, probably mothers thanks to the visual juxtaposition with children playing or studying, while on the other hand the positive emotions associated with business entrepreneurship are always associated to men. This can be seen as the “infantilisation” issue described by Dogra (2012, p.31): in the video children are almost always reading, as a visual reference to the fact the project is helping them studying, while the health issue related to the fact they do not use kerosene lamp anymore has no visual representation. Children are also briefly represented while playing, an emotional appeal to the Global North audience and to the ‘before and
after’ narrative, implicitly referring to a ‘dark’ period before the project and showing how happy they are now. The analysis of the video has highlighted what I have defined ‘the dictatorship of the storytelling’, showing how the video producer must encode a certain message in a way that is easily understandable by its main audience, in this case the Global North one: in doing so it must resort to representation tools that make this message easily decodable for the main audience, but as we have seen a direct consequence of this would be for the Global South audience to be misrepresented, flatten into stereotypes.

Another main point is the interaction between market, state and NGOs. The latter are at the juncture of the top-down diffusion model from the first two actors, while at the same time charities carry a bottom-up social interests. From a Communication for Development point of view, this intrinsic duality means NGOs are trying to implement an ‘alternative’ development while using mainstream, Neoliberal tools. A possible solution for this impasse could be to ‘use’ the forces of states and market to deliver more impactful projects: NGOs can integrate states’ bureaucracy and market efficiency into their communication, while reaching audiences that are impregnable to the other two actors.

The thesis has then analysed the shape of a communication plan for the RE-energizing project, taking into account the above analysis and trying to set up a pre-recording video script for it. As for the Bijli program, this initiative has a marked Neoliberal objective, explicitly aiming to use renewable energy as an opportunity to create new bottom-up markets in the area. Another similarity is that it has the same audience, composed by funders in the Global North as a main one, and social media users in the Global North as well as a second one. To find a ‘common ground’ between this strong Neoliberal imprinting and a fair representation of the people filmed, this thesis has proposed to use – and to make it explicit in the video – a participatory approach in selecting both the main issues related to the project and who should be interviewed. As it is clear from the limitations in the given options, the aim is not to create a participatory video tout court, which due to the risks mentioned before in this thesis would be difficult to be funded by the donors as part of the deliverables, but rather an approach to overcome some of the issues seen in the Bijli video and find a
good balance. In particular, this thesis suggests the process of selection of themes and people should be an essential part of the video, which should start by explaining such method. In turn, this participatory approach should also highlight underlying social and economic issues, such as women’s role in that society and the roots of IDPs poverty. This would also help steering away from the ‘before and after’ narrative, giving full context of the issues treated and giving back dignity to the people represented not as hopeless, but victims of a much broader circumstance where, for example, they have been forced to move by floods, droughts or food insecurity caused by climate change – an issue indeed mainly caused by the Global North. This almost bottom-up approach should also fairly represent life in the camp, avoiding shocking images and easy appeals to basic human emotions linked to children and motherhood, while on the contrary reinforcing the sense of community both in the eyes of the main audience and in that community, closing the circle of representation and identity. Finally, to overcome the ‘dictatorship of the storytelling’, this thesis proposes to use personal stories only if put in a broader context, which would dignify them not just as the account of an unfortunate life, but as the paradigm of an underlying, broader issue that must be tackled before any ‘feel good, job done’ sentiment from the Global North audience.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that it is not possible to give a ‘recipe’ for the “perfect video”, even if it would be tempting in today’s complex and frantic world dominated by NGOs and communication. It has also shown that even when communication is planned with the best intentions, possible misunderstandings are always around the corner – and in some way, as the theoretical analysis has indicated, are inevitable. In a way, this is intrinsic to the ‘NGOs dilemma’: they are forced to work with the market and states, but they must also preserve their independence in order to be credible and impactful. On a Communication for Development perspective, these new forms and partnerships risk to simply reiterate a modernization approach where problems can be solved filling the cultural and information deficit of the recipients. The risk here is to see communication as a ‘magic bullet’ that follows a linear pattern, with measurable and quantifiable outcomes. A compromise between this approach and a more participative one could be to
empower communities while providing policies that can support a wider, long-term change. The two approaches can be also integrated with multimedia and interpersonal communication, further promoting the dialogue between market, state, NGOs and communities. This is not just an academic exercise: it is our duty as professional working in this field to make sure not to sacrifice a fair representation of the people we engage with on the altar of a quick win with our main audience. As we have seen, representation is not just a naïve ask steaming from Post-development studies but it shapes our identities, our values system, our perception of the world. It is therefore paramount to utilise a mixed, more integrated approach that could overcome this inherent dilemma.
7. Appendix

7.1 Bijli’s video transcript

Just as dawn sets in, imagine living in darkness with a gleaming light [coming] to your rescue. This is the plight of almost 400 million people in India who do not have access to electricity.

There are villages in India that are still not connected by paved roads, or [where] you must travel by land, water and foot before reaching your destination; where even the most basic infrastructure is elusive.

To bridge this gap The Climate Group initiated the Bijli - Clean energy for all program, principally funded by the Dutch postcode lottery. The Bijli program, launched in April 2013, partnered with social enterprises as well as NGOs to try out different business models for clean energy provision in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Jharkhand.

[Gopal Gosh, Founder, BGMS group, Village Bagnan, West Bengal] “Big organizations like The Climate Group also come to promote this solar power. Actually, their support is very essential for us, because they have the expertise – which is very needed for this, and at the same time they made very low-cost models also, which will be helpful for poor people to buy. And in this way we can promote solar power in our area.”

It has demonstrated innovative business models for three basic and simple energy solutions. One is the cost-effective solar lamp, which has a solar panel with a rechargeable battery. This battery can last up to four to five hours, thereby enabling charging of mobile phones and providing lighting at night.

The second solution is the solar home system, that has a larger battery and can enable the use of television, fan and lights at night.

The third and the most attractive service is the solar micro grid, where in a small community solar power station is connected to homes, and the payment happens as per the usage just like Direct To Home service or prepaid mobile phones.

Bijli program has already connected over 50,000 people to cleaner and affordable electricity, with improved safety levels.

[Palass Kumar gayel – in his language] “The day we had electricity in our home, we danced. Now our life has really improved. We’re very happy.”

[Shilpi, Housewife – in her language] “We are really thankful to who brought this solar power to our village. Now we can have a better life.”

[Sabita Giri, Housewife – in her language] “Now children can study until late night. Earlier I used to buy kerosene oil, but with the solar home systems we save a lot of money.”
Thanks to Bijli, people now look forward to the evenings when their recharged solar batteries are delivered to them.

The success of the Bijli project is evident in the smiles of these villagers.

Sunanda can comfortably work late and go back home to enjoy a peaceful evening with her family.

Bijli, as a people’s initiative, contributes towards a better and healthier life for villagers.

[Histika Mohiti, Student – in her language] “I help my younger sister with her studies. When I was studying using a kerosene lamp, I had so many problems that I was unable to study properly. I can study longer, and for a longer time, under this light. Now my eyes are not irritated anymore.”

[Rekha Mohiti, Housewife – in her language] “If I’m late while working outside, thanks to this light I am still able to cook at night. Now we are not scared by the darkness. We can see who’s coming at night.”

Darkness is no longer feared but is the time to come together as a community, for they can now celebrate their nights.

[visual: “60,000 lives already touched by Bijli and moving swiftly towards universal energy access”]
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