‘Hope against hope’:

An exploratory study of perceptions of current and future global progress among communications for development experts

Alexandra Reis
Abstract

Multi-country surveys indicate widespread pessimism about global progress and about the effectiveness of the international development sector, despite indicators showing significant advancement in most areas. These perceptions are especially noteworthy because they can influence the public’s opinion on other social issues such as multilateralism, migration, or poverty. This pessimism originates in part in the information about development that organizations working in that sector produce. Development communicators are both creators, as well as audiences, of this material, but empirical evidence on the impact their world views have on the content they create is limited. This thesis aims to address this gap.

Findings were canvassed using a qualitative method in the form of in-depth interviews. Seven participants were selected for having a decision-making position within their organizations, along with a mix of nationalities, type of organization and work experience – headquarters and field. The approach for this research was informed by postdevelopment critique, which examines the power of the discourse of development in constructing ideas about people and development.

This study concludes that development communicators are as pessimistic as the general public, although it remains unclear to what extent this pessimism impacts the messages and content they produce. A key finding is that communicators deny being influenced by their personal views, citing instead organizational rules and communications objectives as their main influences when creating content. They also deny being influenced by the media, not recognizing their role as audience.

In general, this study points to a lack of self-reflection and self-awareness among development communicators of their personal input and biases in their work, and the full impact of their output on their audiences’ perception of the world. This study also indicates that, while acknowledging the negative information about development that the general public is exposed to, communication experts mainly credit the media for this information, and don’t recognize how the development sector influences media content. The study also reveals that the communicators’ pessimism about the world is likely connected with a disillusionment with the sector and their work.

Development communicators are key actors in the global development sector because of their role in constructing the way the sector is presented to the global public. This research directly contributes to understanding their role as mediators of global perceptions, a process with significant moral and political implications.

Key words: perceptions, communication for development, optimism, pessimism, progress, postdevelopment
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Alexandra Reis

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Glossary

**Developed/Developing; Global North/Global South**: These terms are debated in the discourse on development and are contentious. In this thesis, I use them to describe the binary of the West and the ‘Rest’. In general discourse, this is seen as meaning that the countries in the OECD are the ‘West’ and those that are not are the ‘developing world’.

**Development organizations**: I use this term to describe non-profit organizations that work in international development, including non-profit organizations, United Nations agencies or cooperation agencies (e.g. DFID, USAID). I use the terms ‘development sector’ to refer to these organizations collectively. For the purpose of this study, the distinction between certain types of development organizations is not relevant. I use the term **development communicators** to refer to the people that work in communications in development organizations.

**Progress**: The term progress is also debatable. For the purposes of this study, I use it to indicate a positive trend in overarching global development indicators, such as those reporting on education, health or income.
Chapter 1: Introduction

If you had to choose one moment in history in which you could be born, and you didn’t know ahead of time who you were going to be – what nationality, what gender, what race, whether you’d be rich or poor, gay or straight, what faith you’d be born into – you would choose right now.

Barack Obama

This thesis explores the extent to which communications for development experts are hopeful or pessimistic about past and future global progress and whether this influences the way they create messages. Several studies and surveys show that the general public believes the world and humanity are worse than before and getting worst (e.g. Glocalities, 2017, Poushter, 2017). These beliefs both reflect and influence other social and political opinions around the economy, migration, war, or the environment (Bond, 2016). It is also an indication of a lack of knowledge about, and trust in, the impact of the international development sector (McDonnell et al., 2002; Van Heerden-Hudson and Hudson, 2010).

Development communicators, though the content they produce, contribute to the way their audiences understand and view international development (Scott, 2009), making them a relevant subject for academic research. They are content creators, but also audience of content created by others. This thesis explores the dual role of these experts as both audience and content producers. It looks at the perceptions of global progress among development communication experts and investigates how those perceptions influence the tone of the messages and products they develop. It also looks at these experts’ own awareness of their role in creating perceptions of progress among their audiences, and if that awareness also influences their work.

This thesis is grounded in postcolonialism theories that argue that texts, images and other man-made materials can and should be analyzed to examine the way they support a particular way of viewing and ordering the world. Spivak (as discussed by Kapoor, 2004) claims that “representations of the Third World cannot escape our institutional positioning” and this lens highlights the role of the development communicator as a piece in the machinery that shapes discourse around people and places.

This thesis also touches on several points of postdevelopment critique, in particular their challenge of the way development almost always implies a passive developing world, often concentrating on the negative impacts of development rather than what is gained or negotiated (McGregor, 2009).
Respondents in the surveys that show almost universal pessimist among the general public did not come only from the Global North. Development communications experts also do not only originate from the Global North or work for organizations based there. Pessimistic perceptions of progress and skepticism about the impact of international development seem to indicate cross-latitudinal attitudes and beliefs.

The “Introduction” chapter of this thesis continues with more information about perceptions of global progress worldwide, as well as attitudes about the international development sector. The following chapter on “Theoretical context” frames this thesis in more detail among the postcolonial and postdevelopment theories already mentioned above. Subsequently, the “Literature review” chapter looks at three areas of study relevant for this thesis: first, a discussion about support towards international development; second, an analysis of the evolution of the use of images of poverty/suffering by development organizations; and third, a look at the science of individual and social optimism and pessimism. The “Methodology” chapter outlines the research strategy and methods of this thesis, including its limitations. The “Presentation of data” chapter lists the research findings, which are then analyzed in the “Discussion” chapter. Conclusions will be summarized in the final chapter, with a note about their implications for the communications for development sector and suggestions for further study.

1.1. Perceptions of global progress versus the indicators

In 2016, then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon argued that “We have reached a level of human suffering without parallel since the founding of the United Nations [70 years ago].” (United Nations, 2016). It was an impressive statement, since it could be easily argued the world had improved significantly. For instance, in the early post-war era, around half a million people died through direct violence in wars while, in contrast, in 2016 the number of all battle-related deaths in conflicts involving at least one state was 87,432 (Rosen, 2019).

However, according to surveys covering several countries in all continents, many people would agree with Ban Ki-moon on the state of the world. A 2016 YouGov survey in 17 countries found that only in China did people think the world was better (42%) than worst (33%). That same year, a survey by Glocalities (2017) revealed that 87% of people in 24 countries think that extreme poverty has either increased or stayed the same. In 2017, a Pew Research Center study in 38 countries found people divided on whether life today is better than before, with 46% saying it is worse than five decades ago (Poushter, 2017). Covering the results from the 2017 Best Countries survey across 36 countries, Deidre McPhillips, Data Editor at US News wrote, “despite increased political and economic polarization, there is one thing the world largely seems to agree on: the world is getting
Despite these perceptions, the most reliable development indicators show that, in general, human beings in the world today are better off than their ancestors (World Bank, 2019; Our World in Data, 2019; Gapminder Foundation, 2019). For instance, extreme poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, child labor and child mortality, and the use of the death penalty are lower than at any other time in human history. Life expectancy, and equality for women, ethnic, and sexual minorities have also dramatically improved. The chances that any individual will be exposed to war, die in a natural disaster, or live under a dictatorship, are smaller than at any other time in history.

The causes and potential consequences of this seemingly generalized pessimism about international development have only begun to be researched and understood. This thesis plans to contribute to that research by investigating the contribution of communications experts working in development to creating or re-enforcing these negative perceptions, and the level of self-awareness among them regarding this contribution.

1.2. Attitudes towards international development

The origin of the public’s perceptions of, and attitudes towards, international development are not easy to pin down since they correlate not only with levels of knowledge about development, but also with a wide range of socio-political, socio-demographic and wider attitudinal factors (Bolitho, et al, 2007).

Numerous studies, mostly focusing on audiences in developed countries, suggest that public understanding of international development is limited (McDonnell et al., 2002; Van Heerde-Hudson and Hudson, 2010; Avis and Wilson-Cleary, 2015), although people still feel they “know something about the lives of people living in poor countries” (DFID, 2008). It seems that, as with other political issues, when it comes to development the public tends towards ‘low-information rationality’, using heuristic short-cuts to grow opinions even when they lack expert knowledge (Frisk and Taylor, 1984). These short-cuts tend to be pessimistic in nature. The British public, for instance, is overwhelmingly confident that the developing world exists in a permanent state of doom and gloom (McDonnell et al, 2003). They do not have the ability to talk about or picture successful development projects, which leads to a huge amount of skepticism around aid effectiveness and an obsession with corruption (Ingham, 2016; Henson and Lindstrom, 2011).

Commenting on these studies, Hudson and Van Heerde-Hudson (2012) argue that international development is characterized by “low salience, low levels of knowledge and strong opinions”.

Broader social and demographic factors also help form pessimistic interpretations, with political ideology chief among them. Nationality, and a subjective experience of the state of the economy
also play a role, as well as gender and age, with women and young people being more optimistic (idem). Several common psychological biases also help explain the tendency towards pessimism, such as nostalgia, abundance denial, and the way the human brain focuses on and memorizes bad stories more easily (Norberg, 2016).

More relevant to this study, these ‘doom and gloom’ perceptions of international development are supported, re-created and reinforced by external influences. Two of them are particularly powerful: the news, and organizations working in the development sector (e.g. Darnton, 2009; Glennie et al. 2015). The motivations for these two groups to employ pessimistic narratives are easy to recognize. Both journalists and development communicators know that negative and dramatic stories are, as shown above, more appealing to their audience and hence work better for raising awareness, attracting attention, and fundraising. As writer Matt Ridley (2010) puts it,

> No charity ever raised money for its cause by saying things are getting better. No journalist ever got the front page by telling his editor that he wanted to write a story about how disaster was now less likely. Good news is no news, so the media megaphone is at the disposal of any politicians, journalists or activists who can plausibly warn of a coming disaster. As a result, pressure groups and their consumers in the media go to great lengths to search even the most cheerful of statistics for glimmers of doom.

In general, imagery around international development is seen as just a series of disasters, both in news programming and in the advertisements and appeals of development organizations (Scott, 2009).

Also, the line that separates what is news from what is communication for development is blurring, as news organizations often make use of images, footage and copy produced and supplied by the sector’s communications departments (Wright, 2018).

Author Gregg Easterbrook (2018) explains pessimism in the Global North by pointing out that audiences are simply not aware of progress beyond their borders. Because recent gains mostly occurred outside the US or Europe, the good news is happening largely unacknowledged by the West - “Wonderful things are happening, just not here.” (idem).

Most stories about development do not focus on progress made to date, do not provide continuity and nor do they include any sense of narrative, with causes and consequences. Rather, the focus is on the problems still at hand, and these messages, repeated over time, make audiences feel like little progress has been made (Darnton, 2009; Glennie, 2012).
1.3. Why study pessimistic perceptions of progress?

Pessimistic perceptions of global progress may have several harmful consequences, among the general public, and among development workers. Studies show that instead of increasing levels of engagement, negative stories unconnected with any narrative about possible causes or solutions leave people misinformed, disempowered and more likely to use avoidance tactics (e.g. Scott 2009). A large proportion of the population in donor countries now believe aid to be wasted, possibly impacting support for development spending and individual donations (McDonnell, 2006; Riddell, 2007).

Notions such as ‘global progress’ and ‘the state of the world’ may sound too generic from an academic point of view, but in the minds of the general public they are closely associated with the international development sector and other social and political topics. ‘State of the world’ is intrinsically connected to notions of economic development, migration, war and environmental degradation (Bond, 2016), all areas where the development sector is expected to deliver. Also relevant from the perspective of audiences in the Global North, the portrayal of distant places as miserable and hopeless increases the likelihood of negative views on race, refugees, and international cooperation in general (Dogra, 2013; Bargh, 2017; Le Monde, 2017).

Sikkink (2017) also highlights the growing skepticism of development workers regarding the progress they create, which can lead to depression and underperformance. She blames this on their tendency to measure success against the ideal, instead of comparing the present situation to what used to happen. By focusing primarily on not having reached the ideal situation, activists do not acknowledge progress and become discouraged.

Ignoring progress in international development could also prevent a systematic analysis of what worked, thus missing opportunities for replication (idem). In addition, if the public’s and decision-makers’ perceptions of reality are wrong, the wrong policies could be prioritized, leading to ineffectual or no change – a self-fulfilling prophecy.

1.4. Academic definitions of pessimism, optimist, and hope

At the basis of this thesis are notions of ‘pessimism’, ‘optimism’ and ‘hope’. The definition of these terms may vary from person to person and first glance they might lack scientific definition, research in optimism in particular is a burgeoning research field. Before looking into the objectives of this study, it might be useful to look in more detail at exactly we are talking about when we talk about these concepts.

Social scientists have defined the terms ‘hope’ and ‘optimism’ in many different ways. Optimism, as
conceptualized by Scheier and Carver (1985), is the generalized expectancy that the future will be positive. Like hope, it is a positive anticipatory state, however, studies also look into the differences between the two states. In Snyder’s theory on hope (2002), optimism happens with a person focuses on outcome expectancies related to goal-directed behavior, while hope comprises a reciprocal action between efficacy expectancies (i.e., agency) and outcome expectancies (i.e., pathways). Averill et al. (1990) suggested the difference between the two states resides in hope being an emotion, meaning that people will hope for things that are important to them despite a low likelihood of realizing that outcome, whereas optimism is more closely related to the probability of an outcome occurring. People will also hope for things that are more important on a personally level, whereas they will be optimistic for a broader range of outcomes (Bruininks and Malle, 2002). From this perspective, the concept of optimism is especially central to this thesis, as it relates more closely with the public’s and the development communicators’ realistic expectations of the future of the world and humanity.

1.5. Research aim and questions

There are already studies that look into the lives, values and perceptions of development workers (e.g. Fecher, 2012 and Roth, 2015), but none that focus especially on development communicators. None also focuses on these development worker’s knowledge about the sector. Hans Rosling tells an anecdote (2018) about the time he asked a room full of “political and business leaders, entrepreneurs, researchers, activists, journalists, and even high-ranking UN officials” in Davos to answer his questionnaire about the state of the world, and discovered the same ignorance and negative bias he had noticed in other types of groups.

Development communicators are not only producers of content about international development, but also members of the general public, consuming news and campaigns. This research explores the dual role of these experts as both audience and content producers. It looks at the perceptions of global progress among development communication experts and investigates how those perceptions influence the tone of the messages and products they develop. It also looks at these experts’ own awareness of their role in creating perceptions of progress among their audiences, and if that awareness also influences their work.

The central research aim for this study is to answer:

To what extent does the perception of progress in international development among development communication experts influence the way they create messages?

To support this central aim, three research questions focus on specific aspects of the perceptions of
these experts:

- Are development communicators optimistic or pessimistic about the general state of the world, including the impact of their own work?
- Do they believe that more pessimistic and alarmist messages are more effective for achieving their communication objectives?
- How do they perceive the impact of their messages on their audiences’ perception of progress and attitudes towards international development?

Chapter 2: The theoretical context for this study

“We’ll never survive!”

“Nonsense. You’re only saying that because no one ever has.”

William Goldman, The Princess Bride

This section provides a framework for the subsequent analysis of perceptions of progress in international development by development communicators. This study is informed by post-colonialism and especially postdevelopment critiques, which see ‘development’ as an historically-and politically-constructed social project.

2.1. Postdevelopment and the creation of meaning

According to most critics, neither postcolonialism nor postdevelopment should be categorized as inert or homogenous (Sharp & Briggs, 2006; Ziai, 2004). They are complex, ever evolving, and cross over to many different disciplines and into each other (Simon, 2006). At the center of both are concerns around power: what it was, how it manifested itself and how it affects people both in the developing and the developed world.

Edward Said in his seminal work Orientalism (1979), drew upon Foucault’s idea of discourse, and argued that the world is commonly conceived as Eurocentric. He argues that texts, images and other man-made materials can and should be analyzed to examine their perspective, and the way they support a particular way of viewing and ordering the world. For instance, media from the West were not politically neutral, but instead shaped a discourse that positioned people and places. Questions of representation have been central to postcolonialism, with authors such as Gayatri Spivak arguing
there is a double connotation of the term representation, which can refer to the literal subject and the semiotic, and that both of them can reduce whole regionals to a singular signifier (as discussed in Saunders, 2002). In the context of postcolonialism, the power of representation is this ability of words and images to frame and present the Other for consumption by the West. Kapoor (2004) notes that Spivak claims that “representations of the Third World/subaltern cannot escape our institutional positioning(...) we cannot pretend to have a pure or innocent or benevolent encounter with the subaltern. To do so, is to perpetuate, directly or indirectly, forms of imperialism, ethnocentrism, appropriation”. Kapoor himself argues that two implications follow from this: first, that our representations of the Global South are institutionally biased; and secondly, that we ‘produce’ the Global South, and to a large extent doing it to “suit our own image and desire. Our representations of the Other are only in so far as we want to know it and control it” (idem).

Postcolonialism challenges the established way of thinking about how the world is described, how people are described, spoken about and for, and categorized. They challenge the very relationships that decide who speaks for whom and when (Bhabha, 1983; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988) and also acknowledge that the most powerful forces can limit or discredit different ways of thinking (Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997; Sardar, 1999).

While postcolonialism originated as a literary critique, postdevelopment arose from the discontent with the development sector following the development deadlock of the 1980s (Escobar, 2007; Kiely, 1999; McGregor, 2009). By that time the sector had achieved such a status that whole institutions, ways of life and ways of thinking were part of the development machine. While analyzing the power of development, Crush (1995) pointed out that the language or discourse of development is central to its critique. In Watts’ contribution to that volume he describes the “development gridlock” and asks whether economic progress along Western ideals is the benchmark for development.

Other authors argue there is a link between colonialism and development, with Hattori (2003) describing the global relationship of development as one founded on the concept of giving: we (the West) have something to offer you, the Rest, namely, progress. This subtle difference in the way assistance is described has been a central part of the development critique, since it is not so much “help in need but help in the overcoming of a deficit” (Gronemeyer, 1992, p. 65). Escobar (1994) describes how development ‘Experts’ were sent to the Global South and institutions were quick to spread and implement the scientific ways of thinking, working and living that ensured the path to progress. What worried Escobar was that, after World War II, the development discourse had become “the central and most ubiquitous operator of the politics of representation and identity” in developing countries. Following the postcolonial perspective, Escobar argued for an analysis of
‘development’ as a discourse, meaning, to recognize that words have power and that questioning how things are constructed is to recognize a deliberate framing and the creation of a narrative that may or may not actually reflect reality.

The power of the image and communications materials in general, is part of this questioning about representation and is part of postdevelopment critique that calls for a close look at the power of the discourse of development.

If development has become so common that its pervasiveness is not noticed, then it is even more important for all aspects to be held under scrutiny. Escobar (1995) notes that such is the prevalence of the development narrative that many people both in the developed and developing world find it difficult to think about the Global South in terms other than those provided by the development discourse, such as poverty, scarcity, illiteracy and vulnerability. People become what we once were, as they are in an ongoing process of catching up. This narrative is about a world order, a Western hegemony where complex and diverse voices are given no space.

This thesis is not an analysis of the textual or visual aspects of representation per se. It acknowledges these but is more concerned about the power of a way of thinking that is formed by representation practices and seeks to explore this power. Development communicators are the audiences of content about development and it is safe to assume they are influence by what they see and read, just as the general public. At the same time, they are also responsible for creating development narratives, and it is worth examining more closely how their role as audience influences their role as creators and whether they perpetuate any development stereotypes.

2.2. Critiques of postdevelopment

Postdevelopment theory has not been without its own critiques and some of these are relevant to this study. Some authors argue that postdevelopment often frames the development sector as negative, whereas this is not the reality (Storey, 2000). Sardar (1999) argues that postdevelopment seems to be borrowing from the West to critique the West, ensuring the the focus does not change and instead continues the dominance of Western thinking. Furthermore, critics draw attention to the romanticising of poverty and anti-modernity which possibly reflect academic aspirations rather than those for whom development is a daily reality (Ziai, 2004).

Also, postdevelopment seems to undervalue human agency and dismiss how in the Global South development is often negotiated as way of dissent and a means of challenging power. As proposed by Brigg (2002), postdevelopment theorists can tend to attribute too much agency to the West,
viewing power as an imposition, as a force with a particular geographical origin. Instead, Briggs argues that, as a power, development can operate through everyone and is social. Kiely (1999) also claims that postdevelopment “tends to imply a passive Third World, simply having its strings pulled by an all-powerful West”. Lie (2007) takes this further saying that postdevelopment depends too much on a dichotomy of power that affects the individual and society, often, as McGregor argues and is especially relevant to this thesis, concentrating on the negative impacts of development rather than what is “gained or negotiated” (McGregor, 2009).

The postdevelopment approach that I have taken for this study informs the methodology in that the methodology specifically allows development communicators to voice their opinions directly. This study is not a criticism of the workings of development per se. Instead, it aims to contribute towards an understanding of the social conditions in which ideas about development are created, disseminated, received and interpreted. It focuses on several points of postdevelopment critique, in particular the way development almost always implies a passive developing world, that cannot progress without the support of the West.

Chapter 3: Locating the research in the literature

*Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory.*
Franklin Pierce Adams

In this chapter I outline my review of existing literature about the topics of this study, with a focus on three areas: first, a discussion of how perceptions of progress affect the general public’s attitudes towards international development; second, an analysis of the evolution of the use of images of poverty/suffering by development organizations; and third, a look at the science of individual and social optimism and pessimism. This last area is somewhat removed from communications for development and perhaps closer to psychology, but it is still relevant to this study, as it can reveal common human biases that contribute to explaining attitudes about international development.

3.1. Perceptions of progress and attitudes towards development

Existing literature about perceptions of progress in international development are mostly connected to studies on the motivations for international development assistance, usually commissioned by donor agencies (Avis and Wilson-Cleary, 2015). Arguably, the UK enjoys the most comprehensive data on public attitudes amongst major donor nations (Henson and Lindstrom, 2011), but even current British literature on this topic presents a disparate
body of knowledge. Most fails to sufficiently identify key drivers or individual motivations of public support for development, and there is also limited evidence exploring the contribution of different actors in shaping these perceptions (idem; Hudson and Van Heerde-Hudson, 2010 and 2011; Bond, 2015). At best, evidence is indicative rather than conclusive. This study aims at contributing to this evidence.

Still, lack of public support for aid appears to be associated with an extremely high degree of ignorance about what aid is, how much is spent, and what it does (Hudson and Van Heerde-Hudson, 2010; Avis and Wilson-Cleary, 2015; Riddell, 2015). Darnton (2009) concluded that “the public as a whole remains uninterested in and ill-informed about global poverty”. These low levels of public understanding apply to several dimensions of development, such as government spending on development, the Sustainable Development Goals, what causes poverty, what leads to success, and what long-lasting development interventions look like (Bond, 2016).

Development support by donor governments is also exclusively connected in the public’s mind to short-term disaster response. The OECD Development Awareness Centre (2003) found that, across donor nations, the prevailing understanding of aid was as short-term charity for humanitarian relief. In his review of whether aid works, Riddell (2007) comments that “public support for aid appears to be associated with an extremely high degree of ignorance about what it does: most turns out to be support for humanitarian and emergency aid to address immediate problems, rather than long-term development aid”. This belief that international development interventions are mostly connected to successive crises is supported by the media and development organizations looking for dramatic story angles and instilling a sense of urgency while asking for donations. Shaw (1996) argues that representation of conflicts in distant societies cannot be left safely in the hands of the media as media attention is brief, victim-oriented and takes its cue from national governments and international organizations.

Another problematic narrative on development that blocks positive perceptions of progress is about the causes of poverty. The causes of poverty are seen as internal to poor countries - famine, war, bad governance, overpopulation and so on – and the richer countries as having overcome such problems, and hence ready to share teachings. This very dominant paradigm has been labelled the Live Aid Legacy, characterized by the relationship of ‘Powerful Giver’ and ‘Grateful Receiver’ and is constantly being reinforced and re-created by campaigns of development organizations (McDonnell et al, 2003; Darnton and Kirk, 2011). Research shows that public perceptions have been stuck in this frame for 25 years (idem) and reports feelings of hopelessness among respondents when discussing global poverty, as well as an almost universal feeling that,
Despite decades of efforts to combat poverty in places like Africa, little has changed (Creative, 2008).

‘Live Aid’ became a meta-narrative that has proven difficult to break and prevents a clear sense of progress along Western or non-Western standards.

**Lack of context**

In his work for DFID, Greg Philo of the Glasgow Media Group wrote about the “halfway through problem”, whereby viewers are not told about the background to developing-world news stories, and nor are they then kept informed of the outcomes (DFID 2000 in Darnton 2007). Most programming about development does not provide such continuity, and nor does it include any sense of narrative, with causes and consequences. Viewers criticize what they see to be the relentlessly depressing nature of stories about the developing world, listing as top-of-the-mind associations poverty, natural disasters, and ‘bad news’ in general (DFID/BBC, 2002).

In the long-term, this focus on negative messages reinforces audiences’ sense of being bombarded with demands for help, that in turn promotes compassion fatigue, resistance and withdrawal (Seu and Orgad, 2014; Tibbett and Stalker, 2014). Surveys measuring trust in institutions demonstrate a decline in trust of organizations working in development, and the relation between that decline and aggressive fundraising tactics coupled with an incapability to demonstrate impact and progress (Cornish, 2017). Non-profits are increasingly perceived as groups that prioritize their own ideologies or that respond to the interests of their donors and members, rather than the groups they represent (Tortajada, 2017).

Despite these perceptions, the literature suggests there is an anomalous relationship between perceived aid effectiveness and public support for aid: a large proportion of the population in donor countries believe aid to be wasted, but nevertheless support international development assistance (McDonnell, 2006; Riddel, 2007, Henson et al. 2010). However, many experts suggest that lack of trust in aid effectiveness makes support to development aid more subject to variables such as economic downturns (Glennie, 2016).

### 3.2. Images of poverty

Images and accompanying text on campaign or advocacy posters, promotional leaflets and disaster relief material are the public face of the international development sector, and the source of much of the public’s information about it, especially in the Global North. Humanitarian agencies, social movements and community organizations are the ‘new institutions of representation’ (Shaw, 1996), influencing policy, practices and discourses of
development. They thus have a significant role in building the way the public perceives international development and global progress.

Communications materials about development have been studied critically since the Biafra Famine of the 1960s. Many studies suggest that virtually all fundraising appeals by development organizations until the 1980s showed ‘negative’ imagery characterized by helpless, passive, ‘victim’ depictions of Southern people, particularly from Africa, and heroic Western saviors (Benthall, 1993). From the 1980s onwards, questions started to be raised about the impact of these imageries both on the subjects and the intended audience (Lidchi, 1999), leading to the emergence of more ‘positive’ messages.

It is important to acknowledge that ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ is a generalized way to approach materials which hide grey areas, power relations and complex beliefs. With the probable exception of ‘extreme’ images such as hungry children, materials in general are somewhere between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’, because of different potential readings, context, time, purpose and, as this study might uncover, personal views about the state of the world by their creators.

Ultimately, the images development organizations choose to project are not based on unmediated or ‘free’ choice. For instance, there are limitations of laws, or the tug of multiple stakeholders. However, there is still a choice which is deliberately exercised by communications experts when they select one image or message over another and use it publicly.

‘Negative’ images

Arturo Escobar (1994) suggests that the image of the humanitarian campaign of starving children is “the most striking symbol of the power of the First World over the Third”. Kapoor (2004) makes the claim that the images are carefully produced to suit the West’s image and desire, often to emphasize differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The literature includes several studies of specific generic styles of development imagery. For example, Dogra (2012) and Moro (1998) argue that the images carry connotations, and that these signal certain meanings that reinforce cultural and economic difference and stereotypes, such as those associated with the Live Aid Legacy. Smith and Yanacopulos (2004) maintain that “The public faces of development do not exist in a vacuum. They are a key dimension of the wider political economy of development and are hence fundamentally shaped by the operation of power”. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is this operation of power that concerns postdevelopment and postcolonial thinking. Images of development produce ways of thinking about development and this includes ways of thinking about those who live in the developing world, which in turn influences the way people think about the state of the world in general. Such deliberate framing of development leads viewers to make significant attribution
errors (Krull et al., 1999) possibly further entrenching dominant meta-narratives and established discourses of development.

Criticism of ‘negative’ images further focuses on their use by both development organizations and Western media in a way that is often patronizing or demeaning to the poor (see Smith & Yanacopulos, 2004, for an overview). The debate, both in academia and general commentary, centered around the idea that repeated, single-version, and largely negative stories of the developing world gave rise to a branding effect that simplified complex situations, using sound bites that supported the agendas of fund-seeking development organizations (Ankomah, 2008; Davis, 2007; Fan, 2006; Mahadeo & McKinney, 2007; Roy, 2007; Ford, 2009).

Studies in the development sector and visual studies that focus on the audience also questioned the morality of images of suffering, asking whether their decontextualization, their mass use by media, their commercialization of poverty, and stereotyping, may cause more harm than the good intended (Bell and Coicaud, 2007; Elliot, 2003; Kennedy, 2009).

‘Positive’ messages

From the mid-1980s development organizations began to understand the importance of development education and advocacy: educating Northern publics on global issues and influencing the policies of Northern governments through three-pronged processes of information, promotion of humanitarian values and spurring of community action (Minear, 1987; Dogra, 2005). The use of photographs of children and personal stories of clients who are often given a name became more common during this period.

These dual interests of education/advocacy in imagery and development led to direct efforts by development organizations to move away from ‘negative images’ through guidelines and codes of practice on visual communications. In 1989, the General Assembly of European NGOs adopted its Code of Conduct on images related to the Third World, discarding ‘negative’ visual images in favor of ‘deliberate positivism’ in imagery showing self-reliant and active people of the South (Lidchi, 1999; Smillie, 1995). However, imagery in Western media, which makes up the bulk of representation, remained simplistic and mainly negative (Benthal, 1993; DFID, 2000; VSO, 2002). Development organizations were often accused of maintaining a sanctimonious attitude as they benefit indirectly from continuous public exposure to such images.

Critics of this positive spin also argue that the conscious attempts by development organizations to avoid ‘negative’ imagery seem to have resulted in the dogma of ‘positive’ imagery in development communications (Benthal, 1993). Nandita Dogra (2007) argues that “positive imagery is a lazy way out and lets INGOs ignore messy questions of power and ideology”. She also questions whether
these types of images reflect the success of the development organizations or are a way of getting around criticism. Dogra (idem) questions, “Does an idealized, ‘happy’ image show the achievements of the INGO thereby representing a post-intervention scenario? Is it just the safest way out of the strong criticism of ‘negative’ imagery?”

3.3. Individual Optimism and Social Pessimism

Several psychologists and neuroscientists have recently started to study the empirical phenomenon that while people tend to be optimistic about their own future, they can at the same time be deeply pessimistic about the future of their nation or the world. Paul Dolan (2014), believes people respond pessimistically to questions about national or international performance for three reasons. First, individuals rarely think about grand issues such as the state of the nation or world, and so respond with an ‘on-the-spot’ answer that may not be well considered or even a true reflection of their beliefs. Secondly, the framing can influence the individual’s response and the question itself may bias responses: ‘who would bother to ask if everything were okay?’ Thirdly, responses to questions such as these, or more general questions about happiness or life satisfaction, are heavily influenced by ephemeral recent events. In psychology this is referred to as the ‘availability bias’.

This explanation suggests there is a problem of information, which aligns with findings in the first section of this chapter: if the public is mostly ignorant about development, then their judgement may suffer from a bias related to transient events or framing. This is especially true when information about progress is mainly delivered as statistics. As the Gapminder Foundation (2019) argues:

> Statistical facts don’t come to people naturally. Quite the opposite. Most people understand the world by generalizing personal experiences which are very biased. In the media the “news-worthy” events exaggerate the unusual and put the focus on swift changes. Slow and steady changes in major trends don’t get much attention.

Another explanation put forward by Seligman (1998) suggests a link between control and optimism. If we feel more in control of our lives, we tend to be happier, healthier and more optimistic about the future. This could also help explain the gap between individual and societal optimism: we are in direct control of our lives but not that of the nation, so we feel more optimistic about ourselves. This is supported by Prawitz (2014), who found that people who believed that they were in charge of their own lives were less despondent and more optimistic after the 2008 economic crisis than those who believed their fates largely rested with others.
This phenomenon is not limited to economics, but also relates to other topics. Bjørn Lomborg (1998) reports that, in many countries, the amount of pessimism about the environment at global level is vastly larger than the pessimism about the local or national environment. Similar results turn up when people comment on poverty, drug consumption, or the prevalence of crime. The phenomenon is so widespread that economist Max Roser (2019) has given it a name: “local optimism and national pessimism.”

Worth noting, for the purposes of this study, that research reveals that the gap between local optimism and national pessimism is larger among people who have more exposure to the news (González, 2017).

Chapter 4: Methodology

“Hooray! Hooray! The end of the world has been postponed!”
Hergé, Tintin: The Shooting Star

This chapter describes the methodology I employed to answer the research questions. I have described how a postdevelopment approach seeks to uncover the power of development imagery and communication, and that I will study development communicators in their dual capacity as both active agents in creating content about development and in receiving the same content created by others.

The methods reflect an approach based on open-ended discussions that privileged what the communicators thought. In line with a postdevelopment approach, this research specifically places what are arguably previously unheard voices at the center of the study.

4.1. Research approach

According to Gray et al. (2007) there are three ways of doing research: exploration, description, and explanation. Exploration aims to gain familiarity with a phenomenon or to acquire new insights into it. Description tries to understand how a mechanism works on its own and in combination with other factors, and explanation is describing why a certain phenomenon behaves as it does. This study has a stronger focus on exploration. I do not have any assumptions about how development communicators perceive the state of the world and there is also no previous literature that tackles this topic. However, it is likely I will find patterns in the answers, which I will endeavor to describe. In that case, I will also aim to know why those patterns happen, so the study could also have an
explanatory component. The sections below explain how I will combine the above-mentioned ways of doing systematic research and will funnel them down to conclusions.

4.2. Research process and type

According to Hyde (2000), inductive research builds theories while deductive research is a theory-testing method. The exploratory nature of the research question means my approach must be inductive and this will have implications on the methods chosen.

There are mainly two types of research: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. This study is less suited to quantitative research methods since I will look at individual perceptions, attitudes and motivations within dynamic and complex topics (Yin, 2009; Mayring, 2003). Therefore, I will use qualitative research methods.

Within the qualitative research, I would describe this study as phenomenological, meaning, it will allow me to delve into the perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of people who have experienced or lived the situation that interests me, in this case the creation of messages about development (Groenewald, 2014).

4.3. Research strategy

In qualitative research, various strategies can be applied, such as only one or a combination of interviews, ethnographic studies or focus groups. For this thesis, I chose in-depth interviews as the most appropriate method.

In-depth interviewing involves conducting intense individual interviews to unfold information about the complex processes behind behaviors, attitudes, motivations or perceptions (Guest et al., 2013). This is ideal for the exploratory nature of the research question, where no theory or assumption is being tested. It is also because of this exploratory nature that I plan to conduct semi-structured interviews (Smith et al., 2005), which begin with broad questions but rely substantially on the interaction between interviewer and informant in order to gain information (Minichiello et al., 1995).

4.4. Alternative research methods

I considered other qualitative methods that could also answer the research question, in particular focus groups. They would be adequate to answer the research questions because it would also allow an analysis of the participants’ perceptions, points of view, opinions and thoughts (Patton, 1990).
I set this option aside in favor of in-depth interviews as I came to realize how exploratory in nature this research really was. The focus group approach demands an initial hypothesis, which I was not ready to make. Interviews also offer a better opportunity to explore decisions and find patterns among group members (Azzara, 2010).

I also considered observation, as it is a good way to study of human behavior. I could observe first-hand the process which development communicators go through when creating content, as well as detect any organizational influences in their work. On a personal level it would also be an interesting way to collect data. However, I discarded this option because it has significant cost and time implications. It would involve travelling or working at the organization of the people being studied (potentially as a volunteer communications officer), which is impossible for me personally and professionally.

4.5. Selection of participants

Once the methodology was chosen, I began the process of selecting interviewees. I was hoping to interview at least six people, since Creswell (1998) recommends at least five and Morse (1994) suggests at least six (see more on sample size in 4.6.).

Despite the small sample, I made sure there was some diversity. Since I am investigating a professional segment, the characteristics I looked for were related to professional background.

- All subjects had a level of seniority that allowed independence and decision-making power when it comes to their organization’s communications strategy and messaging. I did not establish a minimum or maximum age limit, but all subjects had between 10 and 20 years ‘experience in the sector.

- I also looked for diversity in the type of organizations they represent currently or used to represent, including small and international NGOs, United Nations agencies.

- It was important to also have a mix of field and headquarters experience, as that might be an important factor when analyzing their impressions of the state of the world.

- Variety in age, nationality, and gender was also a target, since previous studies show these variables to have a strong impact on attitudes towards development (Hudson and Van Heerde-Hudson, 2012).

To identify individuals, I reached out to friends and colleagues asking them to reach out to their own contacts. I also posted a request for volunteers on LinkedIn and Facebook groups in the sector, such as DEVCOM Connections, The Geneva Communicators Network, Communication for Development (C4D) Group and the United Nations Staff Group.
I was initially in contact with 12 people, but was not able to interview them all, due to scheduling conflicts, given this professional group’s notoriously hectic agendas. In the end, I interviewed seven of the original twelve interested participants, resulting in a group with this profile:

- Three men and four women.
- Ages varied between 32 and 50.
- Except for one participant with only headquarters experience, all others had both field and headquarters experience.
- Two had worked in crisis situations.
- All had at least 10 years’ experience in the international development sector.
- There was variety in the type of organizations participants worked or work for. It included different United Nations agencies, bilateral donors, small local non-profit organizations, international large-scaled non-profit organizations (at headquarters and at their national offices) and news agencies specialized in development news.
- Two were Europeans, two Asian, one African, one North American, and one from Oceania. Specific nationalities: Australian, Bosnian/Serbian, British, Canadian, Japanese, Nepalese and Nigerian.

In a qualitative study, the sample is not expected to be statistically representative of a certain population, however, I believe this study’s sample has a good level of variety.

During the presentation of the data I will identify each different participant with only a number, e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc., in the order in which I made the interviews.

4.6. Reflection on chosen method

Just as any other method, semi-structured in-depth interviews have their limitations. According to Pole and Lampard (2002), interviews are socially constructed and therefore constrained by the circumstance under which they happen. They are of an artificial character and can therefore not be expected to “uncover the truth or the essence of individual belief, experience or opinion” (idem). Also, achieving reliability is difficult in qualitative studies because “the data yielded are a reflection of the circumstances under which the interview is conducted” (idem). Ultimately, reproducing the same interview might lead to different outcomes as a result of the changing context. This is a risk that future researchers of the topic should take into consideration.

Another important concept for research in social science is validity, meaning the question of whether a study accurately measured what it intended to measure (Silverman, 2006). In qualitative
studies, especially in research employing exploratory methods, the question of validity is less straightforward than in quantitative research. To address the question of validity as much as possible, I put special focus on the quality of the process through which the study was designed and conducted. Examples supporting the meaning of the data were given and the context out of which the data was conducted was taken into consideration throughout the analysis (Pole and Lampard, 2002).

Discussions and conclusions of this thesis should be seen more as enlightening examples, stories and voices from actors involved in producing content on international development. The results will hopefully contribute to the ongoing discussion about perceptions of the effectiveness of the development sector and inspire self-reflection among development communicators on their potential to create and reinforce pessimistic world views.

Regarding the sample size, this study has a sample of seven, which is relatively low. Qualitative research experts argue there is no straightforward answer to the question of ‘how many’, and that sample size is contingent on several factors relating to epistemological, methodological, and practical issues (Baker and Edwards (2012). Sandelowski (2014) recommends that qualitative sample sizes are large enough to allow the unfolding of a “new and richly textured understanding” of the phenomenon under study, but small enough so that the “deep, case-oriented analysis” of qualitative data is not excluded. Morse (1994) posits that the more useable data are collected from each person, the fewer participants are needed. She invites researchers to consider parameters, such as the scope of study, the nature of topic, the quality of data, and the study design. Also, based on the findings listed in following chapters, this study has achieved the ‘informational redundancy’ introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985), meaning, the sampling can be terminated when no new information is elicited by sampling more units. After seven interviews, some surprisingly clear patterns emerged that allowed me to derive exploratory conclusions and draw up a list of ideas that need to be further researched.

Still, the limitations of the small sample cannot be ignored. With seven respondents, the extent to which the findings can be extended to a wider population of development communicators is more uncertain. The findings of this research were not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance.
Chapter 5: Communicators and the world – presentation of results

On what principle is it, that when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?

Thomas Babington Macaulay

This chapter presents what the interviewed communicators for development thought about progress in the world, and about the impact of their work in that same perception among the general public.

5.1. Development communicators are pessimists

Each interview’s first question was very general and subjective (See Annex 1) and aimed to explore how interviewees saw the state of the world today compared to the past, as well as their outlook for the future. They were encouraged to generalize.

Most interviewees were very pessimistic. It is worth noting that all major concerns were very similar, focusing on climate change and the rise of nationalistic movements:

“I don’t think we’re better than decades ago. Not really.” (Participant 1)

“Before, we thought we were going to abide by certain international guidelines and ideas, but this was replaced with something else. Nationalistic movements, immigration issues, break downs. People now think America first. My country first. ODA is shrinking. People are getting less interested in international development and world issues.” (Participant 2)

“The environment is also getting worst. It is being degraded by the day. Nothing is getting better.” (Participant 3)

“Regarding the indexes of development, everything is worst. There are more children out of schools than we had before. More people are dying. A lot of things are going back, high incidences of malaria. Preventable diseases are rampant.” (Participant 4)

“We’re a lot worst. And people really need to sit up and take notice. The effects of climate change are coming in, environmental degradation, over-population. This is just the start of it. We’re just putting on band-aids, no one is doing the surgery.” (Participant 5)
“I’m not an optimist. I’m not optimistic because multi-lateral collaboration is falling to bits. State-driven politics are back on the stage. Before, the UN flag was respected. Now I agree with the people who lived in the 1930s [before WWII], there are a lot of déjà vu happening.” (Participant 7)

Even when expressing optimism, respondents are quick to temper it:

“On the whole, the world is probably getting better, but if you look at the inequality gap, then that’s probably getting worst. If the other indicators are getting better and that’s getting worst, are we tackling and measuring the wrong thing?” (Participant 1)

There was some difficulty on the part of interviewees to acknowledge progress to date. When prompted, there was a tendency to acknowledge progress, but to highlight that the progress was at the cost of the environment:

“The indicators are showing great progress but at what cost? We’re not looking at the big picture. People have got clothes, shoes, vaccines, living better lives, but look out of the window: air quality is much worst, a lot less healthy soil, biodiversity was cut by 50% in the last 50 years. All this is going to cost us massively.” (Participant 5)

5.2. The perception of an optimist sector

Findings indicate an Incoherence between the personal attitudes of interviewees, and what they perceive to be the attitude of the sector as a whole.

As indicated in the previous chapter, interviewees were rather pessimistic about the state and future of the world. However, when asked if people working in international development are more pessimistic or optimistic than the general public, they all, without exception, believe development workers are more optimistic. This optimism is perceived as being especially high among field workers, as they are closer to the beneficiaries and see the impact of their work in real time. Although the methodology of this study did not include textual analysis, it is worth noting the interviewees’ use of “them/they” when speaking about development workers.

“I think people on the ground are optimistic. They are really positive about what they are doing. They want to make a change.” (Participant 2)

“Most people who work in development really have their hearts in the right place. They want to do great things - and you can achieve really good things. At field level it can be much more satisfactory because you can see small
improvements and that keeps you going.” (Participant 5)

“People in development are definitely optimistic. That’s why they are working in development. Those working in the field are happier. They see the changes.” (Participant 6)

Responses acknowledge the risk of disenchantment among sector workers, but do not explicitly see themselves as disenchanted, despite the pessimism they demonstrated previously about the world in general:

“There is a lot of cynicism about development by development workers. The longer you’re in it, the more cynical you become. Cynical as in, you’re not really expecting any results. You come in bright-eyed and then as time goes on, the process loses its sheen and you become disillusioned.” (Participant 5)

“People working in development are more open-minded about seeing different points of view. All people in development are people who believe that they can make a change. Once they get disenchanted, once you lose hope - and many do - you have to go, to leave.” (Participant 7)

Several interviewees used this part of the interview to spontaneously criticize the development sector.

“I’m pessimistic about a lot of development systems and the ways people are trying to address issues. A lot of development projects aren’t really focusing on the right thing. They’re sticking plaster rather than addressing the root causes or the systemic issues.” (Participant 1)

“We’re in a much worst situation, and that is because of not well spent development aid. Governments and development agencies are just not tackling things head-on. We circumvent all problems, it’s all a big band aid.” (Participant 5)

5.3. The media as the ultimate source of pessimism

Once interviewees had had the chance to express their own opinion about the state of the world, they were presented with information from the cross-country surveys where the general public reported pessimism about past progress and about the future. They were also informed about the extent to which improvements observed in major development indicators such as life-expectancy, child mortality or HIV deaths. They were then asked for their opinion about the discrepancy.
Answers were overwhelmingly similar, in that media in particular, but also social media, were the causes of negativity and pessimism in the general public. Almost half of the interviewees also explicitly mentioned journalists’ taste for development stories about disaster, doom and gloom.

“Media has got a massive role to play here, in terms of our experience of living in a globalized world, and of our perception of what it means to live in the world. We see what is around us, and anything else is fed through the media.” (Participant 1)

“Media. Social media. That’s where people get their bad news about development. It would be really nice if we had every night a good and bad news section in the news, so we wouldn’t feel so overwhelmed with the problems of the world.” (Participant 5)

For the conclusions of this study it is important to note that, faced with this open question, none of the interviewees spontaneously identified the content produced by development organizations as a source of negative information about development, or the role of those organizations in contributing to the media’s content. And only two interviewees, once prompted, reflected about they themselves being a member of the public and therefore influenced by the media, with one acknowledging the influence and the other denying it:

“I don’t think I’m influenced by what I consume in the media when I develop my messages. Whom I work for is the real influence.” (Participant 2)

“I feel we are worst, and I think it’s due to this age of hyper-connectivity, digital media that can give the personal and gives me the perception that we’re worst off.” (Participant 3)

Beyond painting a dark picture of the international development sector, three of the interviewees also accused the media of showing people in the Global South how the Global North lives, and thus making Southerners unhappy with their lives today, having been perfectly content before:

“We’re becoming greedy. Before we were happy with little things, now you want more. Information is trickling down to the villages. Now they also want the best and that makes them unhappy.” (Participant 6)

5.4. Positive and negative messages as tools of the trade

When asked about how they develop messages and select a tone - positive, negative or neutral - two types of answers were common across all the interviewees. They first acknowledged a lack of
autonomy when creating messages and content, and instead indicated organizational guidelines and traditions are the main factor that lead them to choose a positive or more negative style:

“As the staff member of an organization, you adhere to certain practices, whether they are written rules or approaches, or branding guidelines, or just culture of philosophy, you end up adopting those.” (Participant 1)

“My view [when developing communications materials] is determined by my supervisor or head of the organization.” (Participant 2)

Another finding is the acknowledgement that the decision to use a negative or positive ‘spin’ is conscious and calculated and related to strategy and objectives. Positive messages are more often associated to content about the organization and the organization’s work, while negative messages were more often associated to calls to action, advocacy and stories that need to explain the broader context of a problem.

“Positive stories are more about us, how the organization is doing a great job. But not in the first paragraph, that come much later. First you show that livelihood is improving in this area. And then you say it’s because of our organization.” (Participant 2)

“If it’s promoting the organization you talk about your impact, so we’ll paint a shiny picture of where the donor’s money is going. Then we talk about what still needs to be done, then we end with a call to action and “we need to keep going”. It’s a positive-negative-positive sandwich.” (Participant 3)

As the conversation progressed, interviewees began to acknowledge more explicitly that fundraising and job security are not very far from their minds when doing their work:

“If you are writing a fundraising proposal, you are not going to paint a pretty picture.” (Participant 4)

“You need to keep that sense of urgency. Are you going to give money if you think things are good?” (Participant 3)

“I see the negative stories as people trying to secure their jobs. If everything is ok, why do we need you [development worker]?” (Participant 2)

“Pessimism is a tool of the development trade. We need pessimism to be in business.” (Participant 4)

“We are not doing enough. We’re just trying to continue with your project
and get that project funded. All we want is to sustain this as much as you can.

It’s only human!” (Participant 7)

When asked directly whether the general public’s pessimistic perceptions about the world have an impact on the international development sector, interviewees did not elaborate as much as with other answers. They tended to just explain that pessimism is needed to drive action:

“Just because HIV is not killing as many people as it did 20 years ago, we cannot in all honestly be seen as not having HIV problems, because we need to do even better.” (Participant 4)

“It’s healthy for communications for development people to have the drive of pessimism, it drives you to do better. If everyone was saying it was great all the time, then you’d slack off and think you’re doing a great job.” (Participant 1)

Only one expert acknowledged any negative impact of generalized pessimism:

“There comes a time when pessimism becomes counter-productive. For instance, DFID is under so much pressure from the local tabloid press that they must justify everything.” (Participant 1)

Chapter 6: Discussion: optimism and pessimism among development communicators

I have observed that not the man who hopes when others despair, but the man who despairs when others hope, is admired by a large class of persons as a sage.

John Stuart Mill

The aim of this research was to find out whether development communicators are optimistic or pessimistic about the general state of the world, including about the impact of their sector. Other key research objectives were also to explore if they think pessimistic messages help them reach their objectives more effectively, and if they think their messages influence their audiences’ perceptions of progress and attitudes towards the development sector.

A qualitative mode of enquiry was chosen to answer the key research questions and through the detailed analysis of data provided by seven semi-structured interviews with communications for development experts, results have been presented which endeavor to provide in-depth and
nuanced accounts of the participants’ perspectives.

It is important to note that all participants were chosen for their professional and experience levels, which make them experts in their field, and communications decision-makers within their organizations. They all have between 10- and 20-years’ experience in the international development sector and, with one exception, have worked both at field and global level. All but one are currently working at headquarters level.

This discussion of the research findings will focus attention on three core sets of implications arising from this study. The first set of implications can be grouped around the communicators’ perception of progress in the world and the development sector. The second arises from data relating to the way they develop messages, especially around the dichotomy of negative versus positive messages. The third set of implications are centered on their perceptions of the impact of these messages on their audiences and subsequently on the sector.

This chapter also addresses the limitations of this study and includes several recommendations for future research.

6.1. Are development communicators optimistic or pessimistic?

Surveys covering several countries in the world uncovered a pessimistic general public that have difficulty recognizing progress or imagining a bright future ahead (see Introduction). These pessimistic perceptions were also noticed in more in-depth studies about attitudes towards development, which uncovered a public convinced that the developing world is locked in a perpetual state of doom and gloom (McDonnell et al, 2003; Darnton and Kirk, 2011).

Those studies also indicate that this pessimism is related to low levels of knowledge about the sector, how much it spends, and what it does (McDonnell et al., 2002; Van Heerde- Hudson and Hudson, 2010; Avis and Wilson-Cleary, 2015). Taking only knowledge into account, it would be expected that development communicators might be less pessimistic about the state of the world, as one can reasonably expect them to know better than the general public that development indicators are improving. This was not the case, as the data indicates they are as pessimistic as the general public, or even more. Before this study there was no indication that development workers, including communications experts, were pessimistic about global progress.

There are two general ways to look at this agreement between the experts and the general public. The first is to unquestionably accept the expertise of the interviewees and their superior first-hand knowledge of the development sector. In this case, the perceptions and attitudes of the general public are vindicated: something is deeply wrong with the state of the world and any apparent
progress is questionable.

The second way is to acknowledge that communicators for development have 1) many of the same negative biases as the general public, and 2) their level of knowledge about the sector is also similar to the general public.

Data in this study seem to confirm the existence of bias. Similar to data collected in studies of public attitudes towards development aid (McDonnell et al, 2003; Darnton and Kirk, 2011), development communicators are not immune to development stereotypes, such as the belief that ‘ignorance was bliss’ among people living in the Global South, before Westerners started to lure them with higher ambitions. The field of Behavioral Economics has increasingly called into question the previously held belief that people always make economic decisions in a rational, utilitarian way (Becker, 1957). Marketing experts have for decades exploited emotional decisions that seem to contradict reason for decades (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). In politics, the poor often vote for candidates that defend anti-poor policies. The general public believe the world is worst even though they have witnesses amazing improvements in their lifetime. A similar process can apply to the attitudes of development workers, even though they are likely to know more about development. They too can be mostly influenced by a wide range of socio-political, socio-demographic and wider attitudinal factors, instead of facts (Bolitho et al, 2007).

Regarding knowledge, some participants contradicted generally accepted figures, such as the increasing number of African children going to school and were as skeptical as the general public about the impact of the development sector, especially around lack of aid effectiveness. The level of knowledge about development among development communicators was not the focus of this study. It would be interesting to further investigate this point, to confirm if development workers do have limited knowledge of development beyond their particular professional niche.

6.2. A sector with its heart in the right place

One of the unexpected results of the study was the contrast between participants’ own pessimistic world views and how optimistic they perceive the sector and their colleagues to be. There were explicit mentions of development workers having their ‘heart in the right place’, being hopeful, particularly among those working in the field who get to see the impact of their work first-hand. Nothing in the interviews, or in the literature reviewed, can explain with certainty the reason for this conflict.

The fact interviewees used “they/them” when referring to development workers might be relevant. It seems to indicate a disassociation between communicators for development and the rest of development workers, especially those working in the field, seen as doing more relevant and
fulfilling work. Although all but one of the people interviewed had field experience, all but one are currently at headquarters level. It is possible that communicators do not see themselves as contributing directly to the beneficiaries’ lives, or that they would benefit from a closer and more direct contact with them. Maybe by ‘field workers’ they really mean aid/emergency workers, which they are not. These are several questions for possible further research.

Several interviewees referred to the increasing risk these hopeful development workers will become disenchanted, as time goes by. Despite their explicitly pessimistic views of the state of the world, and their extensive years in the sector, respondents did not see themselves as among the disenchanted. It was also at this point in the interviews that several participants spontaneously criticized the development sector. This could be an indication of an unacknowledged disillusionment of their own which they project onto others in the sector.

This finding seems to indicate that organizations in the sector have trouble maintaining levels of motivation and positivity among their staff over time. This lack of hope among development experts and their disbelief in the effectiveness of their own sector is worrying, and it confirms Sikkink’s (2017) concern about a growing skepticism among activists regarding the progress they create, which can lead to depression and underperformance.

There is a growing body of research on development worker’s mental and emotional health, especially those working in humanitarian or emergency contexts (Mollica et al., 2004). This study confirms the need for organizations to increase their action, with a recommendation for personnel to be monitored regularly and consistently, for signs of eroding motivation as time goes by. As humanitarian psychologist Alessandra Pigni (2017) argues, “those who are committed to ‘a cause’ are at particular risk of burnout because they have ideals and expectations about how the world - including the organization they work for - should look.”

6.3. Perceptions of message effectiveness

Data from this study indicates that the interviewees’ use of negative or positive messages in their work is very deliberate. They were candid about the mechanics of using one or the other depending on the occasion and target audience, but one approach in particular seems to be very popular: the world is in trouble, but we have the solution. Positive messages are used to promote their own organization, while negative messages justify the organization’s need to exist and maintain an ongoing sense of urgency.

This approach works as a more moderate and modern version of the 1980s’ African-victim-
Western-savior formula known as the Live Aid Legacy. Research by McDonnell et al, (2003) and Darnton and Kirk (2011) found campaigns by development organizations are constantly re-enforcing and re-creating this narrative, and this study confirms this is still happening today.

Previous research found that audiences of messages that adhered to the Live Aid Legacy formula report feelings of hopelessness when discussing global poverty and a universal feeling that efforts have long been made to combat poverty in places like Africa and yet little has changed (Creative, 2008). The participants in this study named donors as frequent audiences of their communications and it would be useful to also further investigate in more detail the donors’ own personal perception of, and attitudes towards, progress in the sector.

Another important finding of this study was that interviewees acknowledged a deliberate use of positive or negative messages, while at the same time diminishing their own personal decision-making independence. Organizations were named almost exclusively as the drivers behind messaging choices, even though participants were chosen primarily because of their seniority and position within these organizations. The denial of personal input from most participants in this study indicates a certain lack of accountability that is surprising at their level of responsibility. As demonstrated above, perceptions of and attitudes towards international development have serious consequences for support of aid, multilateralism, migration and other key social issues.

Why are these experienced communicators not fully acknowledging their impact and the agency they possess to change the status quo?

It is true that development communicator are not isolated, and their context is key to determine what they produce. They sit within an organization, which itself sits in a wider institutional context, which is influenced by the global media environment, Member States, and other external stakeholders. In turn, these all feedback to the development communicator. But as the final link of influence before messages go out, they do exercise agency when selecting one image over another.

This study was meant to be exploratory and uncover findings worth a closer investigation. I would mark this issue as exactly that and recommend further research on how possible disenchantment in the sector by development communicators impacts their accountability for their work, their sense of agency, and belief in their power to bring about change through their work. If indeed communicators with this level of experience believe they do not have enough decision-making power, then who above them is responsible, what are their world views and how do they impact their decisions?
6.4. Traditional media as the source of all pessimism

When informed about the cross-country surveys that indicate pessimism by the general public about the state of the world and progress in the sector, all interviewees blamed the media and almost all social media. The media are seen as the source of negative stories about development, and as actively looking for gloom, disaster, scandal and mistakes. These beliefs are aligned with opinions in the general public and among academics. For instance, Shaw (1996) describes the media as having short attention span, being victim-oriented and often aligning with national governments and international organizations. While in other DFID studies viewers criticize the relentlessly depressing nature of news stories about the developing world (DFID/BBC, 2002).

The contribution by development organizations and “NGO journalism” to news about development has been well documented (Wright, 2018). However, faced with the open question about the reasons behind the pessimism among the general public, none of the interviewees spontaneously identified the content produced by development organizations as a possible source of negative information. They also did not spontaneously mention their own role in actively contributing to the media’s content, although they all engage in media relations.

It is also worth noting that the majority of respondents did also not spontaneously reflect on how they themselves were influenced by this same media, especially considering the pessimism they expressed in the first question. The assumption seems to be that their attitude towards progress comes only from their experience in the sector, and hence is more justified than the pessimism of the general public, that comes from second-hand media messages.

As with the data shown above about autonomy in message-building, these two conclusions also indicate a lack of self-reflection or self-awareness among development communicators about the impact of their work beyond their organization’s success indicators.

6.5. Impact of messages on their audiences’ perception of progress

One of the focuses of this study was to understand how development communicators perceive the impact of their messages on their audiences’ perception of progress, and on these audiences’ short- and long-term attitudes towards international development. As indicated above, there was some cognitive dissonance in the way these communications experts view these causes and consequences. On the one hand, they blame the media for the general public’s pessimism, and hence for the public’s perception of their sector. On the other, they acknowledge the use of pessimist stories about development in their work for the same reason journalists do: attracting audience attention and increasing funds.
Data from this study shows that development communicators are acutely aware of the need for fundraising, how this need is prioritized in their work, and how to fundraise using different angles and message tones. These findings align with the research that indicates non-profits are increasingly perceived as groups that prioritize their own ideologies or that respond to the interests of their donors, rather than to those of the groups they represent (Tortajada, 2017). The debate within the development sector, especially among development communicators, around the pull between survival and impact is not new, and this study indicates a need for those debates to continue to happen.

Data also shows that participants never considered the possible impact that pessimistic perceptions can have on the international development sector in general, and their organization’s objectives in particular. They also never considered their own personal contribution to those pessimistic world views. When prompted with information about surveys showing these pessimistic perceptions, the interviewees attribute them to media without acknowledging their own work’s influence directly through the media. When further prodded about this topic, several defended pessimism as a positive outcome, as it drives people to do more, a conclusion that contradicts several studies that indicate that pessimism leads to lack of hope, that in turn leads to a decreasing sense of agency (McDonnell, 2006; Riddell, 2007).

A further study with a larger number of interviewees might help determine whether more optimistic participants have different perceptions of their autonomy at work, and how that relates to their perception of the impact of their messages among their audiences.

6.6. A note on climate change

The issue of climate change was very prominent in the minds of all participants. It is the issue of our times and comes across as the source of much of the pessimism they expressed about the future. Ridley (2010) calls “climate after 2010” and Africa the “two great pessimisms of today”. It is also an issue that seems to cloud perceptions of any type of progress, with some interviewees asking – progress at what cost? I often wondered what the results of this study would have been if it had been done before climate change became so central to the global narrative. It would be interesting to find out if, without the perceived threat of climate change, participants would be just as pessimistic. Maybe pessimists will always be pessimists – studies in psychology around the Adaptation-Level Theory (Brickman et al. 1978) say so – and latch on to other threats like terrorism or economic collapse. Or maybe climate change has such a major impact on the global psyche that even the naturally optimistic find it hard to see a way out of what, from this moment in time, looks like the biggest challenge humanity has ever faced.
At several moments during the writing of this study I worried about its timing – what a moment to be writing about hope and the negative effects of pessimist, when humanity is facing extinction. Would it be perceived as naïve and irrelevant?

Only in the future will we know if the interviewees’ pessimism was justified. Humanity has faced massive challenges before, and each generation was convinced the end was nigh (Ridley, 2010). Will climate change be worse than the World Wars, the Cold War, the black plague, or global-scale slave trade? Or will humanity rise to the challenge and, thought cooperation and innovation, once again come out on the other side better for having been threatened?

One of the most depressing things I heard during the interviews was “How can you be a ten-year old and process climate change? No wonder suicides among children are on the rise.” Kathrin Sikkink argues, that “it is the gap between our ideals and our current practice that gives us the anger we need to fight for change, but it is our knowledge of how far we have come that gives us hope.” (p.21). However serious climate change is, one thing is certain: we will never tackle it with narratives that lead to children being left with no hope or sense of agency.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Don’t worry about the world coming to an end today. It is already tomorrow in Australia.

Charles Schulz

The unknown perceptions of communications for development experts about the state of the world and its future which began this inquiry have been explored and the findings listed and discussed. In this chapter I provide my reflections to this exploration, how the findings contribute to the field and present my concluding thoughts.

While ‘the state of the world’ seems like a very generalized and undefined concept for an academic exploration, this and other studies indicate that, none the less, people have strong opinions about the topic, opinions which are influenced by, and influence, other political and social positions. How these opinions and perceptions are created is therefore of significant importance to the international development sector. Within the international development sector, this is relevant especially to communications for development as communications experts are responsible for creating content that helps the general public form their opinions about development.

While most studies in communication for development focus on implementation of programmes
and how well they embody the field’s pillars, such as sustainability, dialogue, integration and participation, this study turned the focus around and looked exclusively at the practitioners, their beliefs and attitudes.

Surveys across several countries uncovered a widespread pessimism about the future and a conviction that global progress has been small or non-existent. Among other things, this indicates a lack of belief and understanding in the effectiveness of the international development sector. Before this study there was no indication that development workers, including communications experts, were more, or less optimistic about global progress, but data indicates high levels of pessimism similar to those among the general public.

Even though it is clear that development communicators are as pessimist as the general public, it is unclear to what extent this pessimism impacts the messages and content they produce. Surprisingly, the communicators generally deny being influenced by their personal views and opinions, citing organizational guidelines and strategic objectives as their only guidance. They also deny being influenced by the media they are exposed to, not recognizing their role as audiences. In general, this study points to a lack of self-reflection and self-awareness among development communicators of their personal contribution to their work, and the full impact of their work on their audiences. Their own role in choosing the style of the content they create, the possible impact in their audience’s perception of the world in general, and the international development sector in particular, is seldom considered or recognized. This study also indicates that, while acknowledging the negative information about development that the general public is exposed to, the communication experts attribute it mainly to the media, without recognizing how the development sector influences media content about development.

The study also reveals that pessimism among these communicators is likely connected with a disillusionment with the sector that they do not see in themselves, only in colleagues. The communicators’ perceptions come hand in hand with the belief that the development sector is home to optimistic people, who believe they can make a difference. The reason for this dissonance should be further investigated, as it might indicate that communicators do not see themselves as fully contributing to the sector and the effect it generates. It could also indicate that communicators both at headquarters and field level could benefit from more direct contact with beneficiaries, to more fully realize the direct or indirect impact of their work.

Several recommendations for future research arise from this study. Even if not acknowledged by the communicators, it would be relevant to have a more careful look at how world views affect the way they create messages. Also, research on the mental state of development workers tend to only
focus on front-line staff. This study indicates that a more careful examination of disillusionment, compassion fatigue, and the general emotional and mental well-being of people working in development communication is also warranted, both by academia and the organizations that employ them.

This study further indicates the need for the continuous growth and development of the communications for development field. This includes further debates about the role of communication in international development, its potential for positive impact, but also its power as the means through which the entire sector - and the world - is presented to the general global public.
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Annex 1: Interview Guide

1. Tell me more about your professional background, how long have you been working in development? (intro questions, getting participant to feel at ease)

Section 1

*Their own perception as part of the general population: do they have a pessimistic or optimistic outlook on the world in general?*

2. What is your impression about the general state of the world? Are we better or worse that we were? Feel free to generalize.  
   [if asked about timeframe “Since when?” I will ask about how the timeframe influences their perception and answer]

3. How would you evaluate your knowledge about general development in the world? Do you think the level of that knowledge influences your own perceptions?

Section 2

*Views as communications and development experts on the pessimistic perceptions of the general public*

4. Surveys in several countries conclude that people are pessimistic about progress, even though development indicators tell otherwise – why do you think this happens?

5. Do you think that people who work in development are more optimist or pessimistic about development?

6. Do you think about the general public’s level of knowledge about development? [If answer leans towards limited/low] Do you think that influences the way they look perceive progress?

Section 3

*Views on their influence as development communications towards the creation of (pessimistic) perception of progress among general public*

7. How do you think the general audience constructs their perceptions about progress in international development?

8. [if not mentioned, ask explicitly about the work of campaigns/information from non-profit organizations working in development]

9. What types of communications materials do you create – objectives - audiences? How would you classify them in terms of pessimism vs. optimism? Do you think negative messages are more effective?

10. Do you think that pessimistic or negative messages have a negative impact in an audiences’ attitudes towards development?

Session 4

11. AOB - Anything else you would like to add or ask?