

The Last Word . . .

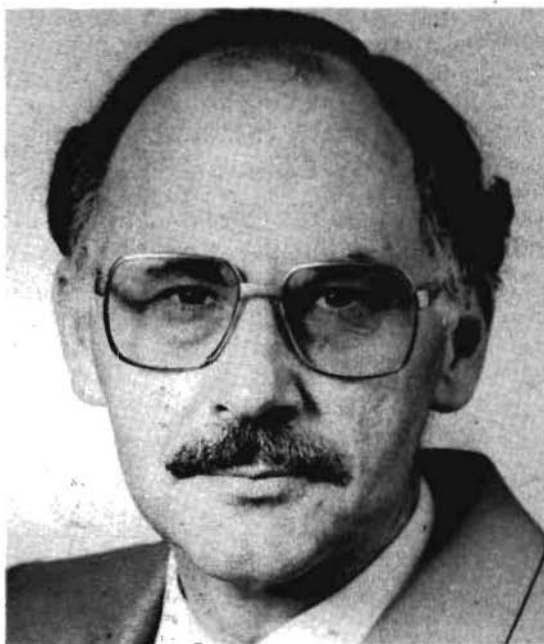
On Communication and Intergroup Relations

H C Marais

WHAT should the role of communications be in a situation like the one experienced in South Africa? The recent research on intergroup relations concluded that tension would probably always be endemic in a deeply divided society. Reform should be priority number one, but in order to be "successful" it should be the outcome of participation and joint decision making.

I WELCOME the debate initiated by Dr Noomen* on the role – potential, real or imagined – of communication in a deeply divided country such as South Africa. Indeed a debate that cannot be drawn to a conclusion by way of a "last word"!

Dr Noomen has indeed focussed on a very crucial aspect of intergroup relations in South Africa, and, for that matter in other segmented societies. Of course, it would be naive to believe that facilitating communication between the various segments of society would improve human relations in a simplistic causal type of process. That is the basic reason why the reports that emanated from the HSRC Investigation into Intergroup Relations explicitly stated that the improvement of communication *per se* (credibility, facilities, receptivity, etc.) could



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not resolve the conflict in this country. Various theoretical and empirical studies, also conducted in this country, testify to this.

What should or could be the role of communication in a situation like this? We concluded that although tension would probably always be endemic in a deeply segmented society, the fact is that the

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Whites in this country have over the ages institutionalised ethnicity unilaterally to become the basic unit for planning and policy formulation. Consultation (not to speak of negotiation) has at best been very limited. At the risk of oversimplifying, we concluded that this led to a legitimacy crisis, which, by definition fostered destructive conflict. In recent years the response of the Whites has been to initiate reform. (A comparison of demands made even three years ago by Blacks would indeed show that the reform steps taken so far have indeed addressed at least some of the crucial issues.) And yet, there are all indications that the destructive conflict has neither subsided in nature nor in magnitude. In fact, one has to come to the conclusion that a seemingly vicious spiral between lack of legitimacy, persistence of conflict and reform has developed.

Various explanations for this vicious spiral can obviously be offered. However, I submit that one of the most important reasons for this is to be found in the observation that the reform has so far been a function of White decision-making processes and not of joint decision making, negotiation, bargaining, etc. – a catch 22 situation! Reform should be priority number

one, but in order to be “successful” it should be the outcome of participation and joint decision making, (at least assuming that group domination is to be abolished and be prevented), otherwise the reform is seen as not being legitimate. However, without reform no one is willing to participate. This is where communication comes in and where we concluded that such mediating processes could help break the logjam. In this sense I am, obviously, largely in agreement with Dr Noomen’s identification of the three aspects of communication that should be investigated; which I believe we did address in our investigation.

One more remark concerning the lack of communication facilitating organisations: Various comparative studies have unequivocally shown the lack of such facilitating organisations, given Dr Noomen’s prerequisites for effective communication, viz credibility, content and the situation of the receiver.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to learn about the very real concerns expressed by Dr Noomen and to share further with you some of the conclusions in our study.

* See Dr Noomen’s letter in *Communicare Forum*, page 60.