

## **RURAL COMMUNICATION AS A REQUIREMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

Since the origin of man, communication has remained a vital tool for sharing feelings and ideas, and providing solutions to the problems in his immediate environment. This study focuses on the imperatives of rural communication and its strategies for sustainable development in Nigeria. It is anchored on development media theory. After an in-depth review of communication concepts and approaches to development, the study discovered that wide gap exists between the communication levels in the urban and the rural areas of the country. As a result, the study emphasises the need for balanced communication input between the rural and urban areas for effective and sustainable development

**Key Words:** Rural Communication. Sustainable Development. Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Communication has remained an integral aspect of man in particular and the society in general. No man, group, association, government or society, can survive without communication. It stands always at the centre of man, his needs, relationships and that of the society. This is because, communication has been commonly identified as a means of transferring or exchanging or transmitting ideas, values, norms, conventions, messages or issues that take place between the sender and the receiver irrespective of where, when, or how. It is aimed at arousing the receiver's inner and outward feeling, consciousness and desire towards taking a proper action or reaction in form of response or feedback.

Any idea communicated is meaningful and purposeful when it passes through the right communication channel to the appropriate and rightful consumer without being tracked down or affected by any form of distortion or noise.

One of the main reasons for communication is to achieve development which could be humanly, materially and resource based. Communication does not occur in a vacuum. It rests on a development need of any given set of people.

Development should not be limited to the satisfaction of basic needs. There are other goals, needs, and values. Development includes all forms of expressions, the right to give and receive ideas and stimulus. It is an all-pervading human activity which deals with discovering the latent potentialities of individuals and mobilizing them to achieve the desired societal goals.

The endless question here is what is the place of communication in achieving development in a development thirsty society like Nigeria? This paper examines communication strategies for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria, highlighting the problems and the challenges.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory for this paper is based on development media theory whose purpose "is to use the press to serve the general good of a nation by making the mass media function as government instruments for achieving economic growth, political stability, national sovereignty, and cultural development" (Okunna, 1994:137).

The theory which is also known as development journalism theory, Khueleni (2003:8), Domatob and Hall (2008 :30), emerged to fill the chasm increasingly noticeable between the developed and developing countries. In their view, journalism should play major role in nation-building through creating national consciousness and unity, and encouragement of co-operative and peaceful existence ' between diverse and sometimes hostile communities. Their expectation of development journalism is that the Third World media practitioners should see the media as an extension of government policies of social, economic and cultural development.

Okunna (1994: 138) expresses the same opinion that development media theory accepts that "economic development and nation-building should take precedence over some freedoms of the press and individuals". The theory advocates that the mass media should assist government in the task of nation-building, and that government should control the media as well as journalists to achieve this goal.

McQuail (1987; 121) lists the tenets of development media theory to include:

- (a) That the media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy;
- (b) That freedom of the media should be open to restriction according to economic priorities and development needs of the society;
- (c) That the media should give priority in news and information with other developing countries which are close geographically, culturally and politically;
- (d) That the media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language(s);
- (e) That in the interest of development, the state has the right to intervene in, or restrict media operations, and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified; and
- (f) That journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedoms in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.

This theory is related to this paper in the sense that development planning and implementations these days are anchored on communication. As observed by Edeani cited in Okunna (1994:139), development communication "denotes the employment of all forms of communication, and not only the mass media, in the promotion of national development efforts", adding that development journalism should pay sustained attention to the coverage of ideas, policies, programmes, activities and events dealing with the improvement of life of the rural people.

### **The Concept of Communication and Communication Strategies**

Every well articulated and packaged communication aims at the realization of varied goals which usually and ultimately result in something new, entailing the exchange of ideas, experience, values, messages and opinions. Communication improves on one's level of information, education, socialization, enlightenment, sensitization, awareness, consciousness and conscientisation. The direct consequence of this is an energized mind and person, who is more prepared to react to an issue more maturely, rationally and pragmatically (Aliede, 2011).

Ugboajah (1985:2) defines communication as "a process that involves all aspects of transmitting messages to channels which link people to the language and symbolic codes which are to transit messages: the means by which messages are received and stored and rules, customs and conventions which defined and regulate humans relationship and event." To him, it is the nexus of human existence in relation to the prevailing rules and customs of the people hence a perception of communication as being rooted in a people's whole culture. Udeze (2002:1) defines communication as "the epicenter of human society". He stresses that it is the wheel on which all human activities revolve, and is used to transfer information, ideas and attitudes from one person to another and without it; society will remain static or stagnant or thrive in confusion.

A broad-based definition of communication includes all the procedures by which one mind may affect another. This of course involves not only written and oral speech, but also music, pictorial arts, the theatre, the ballet and in fact all human behaviour.

Nwosu (2003:25) perceives communication as the exchange of ideas, views, information, experiences as well as other pervasive or influential development between at least two persons or things (or within a person). UNESCO(1980:3) explains that

communication maintains and animates life. It is also the motor and expression of social activity and civilization. It leads people and peoples from instinct to inspiration through variegated processes and systems of enquiry, command and control: it creates a common pool of ideas, strengthens the feeling of togetherness through exchange of messages and translates thoughts into action, reflecting every emotion – and need from the humblest task of human survival to supreme manifestations of creativity or destruction. Communication integrates knowledge, organization and power and runs as a thread linking the earliest memory of man to his noblest aspiration through constant thriving for a better life...

In carrying out any communication for rural/national development, it must be deliberately planned in much broad based tactics, methods, schemes, skills, procedures, modalities and systems injected into various stages of communicated efforts in order to ensure maximum effects and the realization of objectives.

### **The Rural Communicator in Rural Journalism**

Nigeria is one of the developing countries of the world that have over the years witnessed the influx of generation of rural communicators for rural development communication. In most instances, rural communicators are identified as community or rural journalists. They are known as journalists operating at the rural areas either as an aspect of the rural sociology or on visitation bases to a community. The life span of operation of rural journalists is usually affected by diversified factors of ruralism, poverty and development issues confronting the rural community.

The history of rural journalism in Nigeria reveals that rural communicator who are the makers and machines of rural journalism have witnessed persistent and countless appearance and disappearance on the board of operation. This is more pronounced and common in most Nigerian rural areas where majority of the nation's population dwell. They hardly stand the test of time or able to establish dependable functional base for the community as information and communication channels for development.

In spite of all odds, community journalism is still described by some communication and deployment researchers and scholars as a veritable tool and effective channel for rural information distribution, dissemination, transaction and consumption for sustainable development. This is based on the fact that rural or community journalism provides suitable avenues for rural communication and information flow, management and usage in supporting and promoting rural life, culture and development. The imperative of rural/ community journalism cannot be overemphasized. It is such that has in the past and present attracted the attention of the government at all levels and some national and international development agents such as World Bank, World Health Organization, UNICEF and many others for support and encouragement. Unfortunately, the situation has not improved to achieve the desired result and this consequently continues to remind communicators to need for workable solution, especially in rural communities in Nigeria.

With respect to this phenomenon, Nwosu (1986:1-2) reveals some important facts, about rural mass media system. He says:

Since we now know that development does not occur in an information vacuum; that any development objective not transmitted to the appropriate target population for action is worthless; that the identification of appropriate technology for development is one thing, while changing the people's attitude and modifying their behaviour for the adoption of that technology is another matter; that making money available for a development programme without developing a strategy for making sure that the information on it gets to the rightful and needy person, is like a doctor prescribing medicine to a patient without making sure that the medicine gets to the patient.

Nwosu's view emphasizes the necessity for a rural information distribution medium. This is because the rural audiences need to know what is happening around them by getting or receiving the appropriate information they need for their effective social development.

Looking at the present increasing information need of the Nigerian rural communities; rural communicators need to pump out adequate dosages of information on the happenings within and outside their immediate environment. They should be carried along with the activities, programmes and policies of the government of the day. On this note, one is tempted to raise some questions regarding the existence and functional impact of community journalism on rural/national development. Nwodu (2006: 196) describes community press or community journalism as a matter of necessity that needs to facilitate the process of development in rural communities with a view to achieving the following objectives:

1. Educate and motivate rural people to embark on self-help projects;
2. Develop, encourage and sustain responsible leadership in the community;
3. Inculcate a sense of citizenship among rural dwellers;
4. Encourage members' participation in development works;
5. Encourage a healthy socio-economic competition among members of the community.

Nwodu (2006: 196) further states that the functions of the community press should include:

1. surveillance by documenting events happening in the community;
2. correlates events in the community in relation to its environment by interpreting the events;
3. providing entertainment information;
4. for mobilization and publicity needs;
5. transmitting the social heritage of the community;
6. Promoting the spirit of oneness, development and rural/national integration.

In agreement with the above is Nsude (2006:182-183). She states that the need for rural reporting (in community journalism) is to bring about rural development. She expresses that a lot of activities that go on in the rural areas can be harnessed to bring about development.

### **Sustainable Development and the Indices**

This is another area of concern in this study. Development according to Abbah (2000:2-4) includes:

- increased capacity to regulate internal and external relations at a maximum benefit,
- educating manpower to acquire basic working skills,
- increase in ability to guard national independence for external interferences
- increase in level of employment and self-reliance.
- Independent and profitable control of the economy with equal economic chances to majority participation,

- Increase in food production of different types to overcome mass starvation in the country,
- High regard and exercise of fundamental human rights without fear or torture.

Development entails hardwork from individual level to societal level. It does not occur in a vacuum. People must be communicated, motivated and persuaded to participate in development programmes and activities taking place in their immediate environment. To attain this change adequately, these diversified socio-economic political, and cultural areas should collectively be of great concern. This is why Nwuneli (1995:202-203) puts emphasis on social change which is implicit on good education and income, good food and health, attitude to work and quality of lifestyle. "It does not only involve the building of physical structures in a few urban centres but also involves a corresponding change in the basic attitude and behaviour of the people towards most of these indicators of social change mentioned above."

Newsworthy events take place everyday in the rural areas and sources of such rural information include – celebrations (new yam festival, wrestling, etc.), public enlightenment on immunization, HIV/AIDS campaign, traditional marriage, cultural practices such as funeral rites and rituals, as well as agriculture (the planting season).

Rural development is an integrated approach to food production, provision of physical, social and institutional infrastructure with an ultimate goal of bringing about qualitative and quantitative change, which culminates in improved standard of living of the rural population. More so, it is a process of socio-economic change involving the transformation of agrarian society in order to reach a common set of development goals based on the capacities and the needs of people, it is a broad-based reorganization and mobilization of human beings or rural masses so as to enhance their capacity to cope effectively with their day-to-day tasks. The approach involves step-by-step activities for improving and transforming the lots of the populace and includes, according to Ajah (1986:24):

- i. mass mobilization of people and resources for productive services in the rural areas;
- ii. mass participation of rural people which could be achieved by allocation of resources to the rural people and;
- iii. Development of approach skills as well as implementation capacity to sustain new technologies and improvement in the social welfare.

### **Communication for Rural/National Development in Nigeria**

The media of communication have been described as "the Fourth Estate of the Realm". Uwakwe, et al (2007:50), citing Schramm (1964) is of the view that the mass media can contribute substantially to the amount of information available to the people of a developing country. They can widen horizons and thus helping to build empathy; they can focus attention on problems and goals of development: they can raise personal and national aspirations, and all these they can do largely themselves and directly.

The same view is recognized by Ebo (1996:22-23) when she asserts that the mass media and government share the task of explaining, and defending government policies to local and foreign audiences; highlighting cultural relations and programmes designed to serve a number of specific national goals and presenting positive channels or administrative programmes in religion, political, educational, social, economic, scientific and cultural relations which both have administrative stability and foreign support for constitutional diplomacy.

Schramm (1967:6) writing earlier, describes the role of development communication in community development as proportionately greater than at any other stage of social growth: Siebert et al (1963:74) summarizes the functions of the press as follows:

- (a) To make information discussion and consideration of public affair generally accessible;
- (b) To inform the public to enable it take self determined action;
- (c) To act as a watchdog over the government action;
- (d) In bring together buyers and sellers through the medium of advertising;
- (e) To provide 'good' entertainment, and
- (f) To preserve financial autonomy in order not to become dependent on special interests and influences.

From all indications, achieving rural/national development through communication is possible. The challenge is in organising functional rural media as is for urban media by establishing a virile rural mass and community radio.

### **Discussion**

According to (2000:157), "Rural development in order to be effective has to be comprehensive, involving all aspects of rural life and involving the complementary efforts of the communities, the local government, state and federal government as well as private and voluntary agencies".

Over the years in Nigeria, it has been a problem to carry out effective communication for rural development due to the poverty and backwardness cum lack of basic amenities in the area. Also, the problems of rural-urban dichotomy has made communication an urban-centric phenomenon, therefore, undermining the vital and important development oriented happenings in the rural areas.

Communication for national development should strive to overcome this problem through public and private partnership in establishing rural newspaper and community radio system in the rural areas of the country. Thus, the best approach to communication for national development is to involve the collective and collaborative effort of the rural people with those of government authorities, with a view to improving their economic, social and cultural conditions and as well integrate these communities into the development pipeline of the nation so as to enable them contribute fully to national progress.

### **Conclusion and Way Forward**

Communication for rural development has been a great concern for many African communication scholars because over 70% of African population lives in the rural areas and efforts made so far have not really brought succor. There is no doubt that a lot of activities go on in the rural areas and if well harnessed can bring about development in the rural areas that will also best benefit to the urban people. Example of such activities include agriculture, education, cultural activities and works of arts, among others.

The way forward to overcome the problems and challenges facing communication and rural development therefore is to pay greater attention to the rural areas which throb with events that reflect the country's heritage and culture. Rural communicators should be encouraged and supported to unveil or excavate hidden facts from the areas and project them to national level. This will promote rural journalism in both the print and to the broadcast media.

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