

* **Rural Environment and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: The Communication Imperatives**

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- Being text of a paper presented at a 2-day National Conference on
“Rural Environment and Sustainable Development in Nigeria”
organised by the Department of Geography and Planning Sciences,
University of Ado-Ekiti in collaboration with the Research Group For
African Environment and Development, From Thursday October 25 to
Saturday October 27, 2001.

Introduction

More than even before, global concerns for environmental issues have been on the rise. Osuntokun (1997:v) notes that "No political party in today's Western Europe and to a certain extent, in the United States and Canada and by and large in all O.E.C.D. countries can survive without championing environmental causes". Even in Nigeria and other third world nations where concerns over poverty and other socio-political and economic problems seem to be the highest set of priorities, concern over environmental issues has been on the rise. This, as Ayoade (in Osuntokun, 1997:47) explains, could be because man's continued stay on planet earth depends on the environment.

Since environmental concerns have a global character, what role should communication play in sustaining the environment, especially in the rural areas of Nigeria? What communication strategies can be employed to ensure that concerns over the environment are transformed from mere fear and apprehension into significant environment-friendly attitude changes to promote sustainable development? This paper attempts to answer the foregoing questions and other related questions as a way of contributing to attitudinal changes that can help sustain the Nigerian rural environment.

The significance of this paper derives from the conviction that no matter the level of concern for the environment, and no matter the sublimity of strategies evolved to tackle it, results may be unrealised unless appropriate communication strategies are evolved and effectively utilised.

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THE RURAL CHARACTER OF NIGERIA AND THE POTENCY OF COMMUNICATION: THEORETICAL AND PRAXIAL ISSUES

It is estimated that over 80% of Africans (including Nigerians) live in villages, hamlets and hideouts deprived of electricity, pipe-borne water and other modern facilities. Such settlements are characterised by malnutrition, abject poverty, mud houses and huts, kwashiorkor and centuries of criminal negligence by colonial and post-independence governments (Uche, 1999:17).

Oso and Adebayo (1993:vii) corroborate this and point out that over 80% of Nigerian population reside and work in rural areas as farmers. They add that any mention of rural area in Nigeria immediately raises issues of poverty, disease, ignorance, lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity; road, pipe-borne water, etc. The implication of this, they contend, is that two thirds of the Nigerian population could be described as suffering from the problems of underdevelopment, and this

"undermines the country's development potentials while at the same time subjecting a vast majority of its population to inhuman living conditions" (ibid).

Although available evidence indicates that Nigerians themselves are the greatest contributors to the degradation of their own environment in both rural and urban areas (Okpara, 1993:165) it is also revealed that majority of Nigerians are not aware of the intricate relationship between them on the one hand and environmental resources and their utilization on the other (ibid).

The question that arises then is: If more Nigerians are aware of the problems of the environment and their likely consequences on human life, will that help to solve the problem? The answer may not necessarily be in the affirmative because as Dare (in Oso and Adebayo, 1993:2) argues "it is impermissible to conclude that because someone has access to or exposed to some kinds of media fare, he or she is likely to possess certain attributes that are conducive to national development". He contends further that

A farmer may know that the use of fertilizers can improve his yield; he may know of the existence of miracle seeds that can boost his output many times over. But such information is of little use unless he can somehow acquire the fertilizer and the miracle seeds.

In essence, provision of information is not a sufficient condition for a desired attitude change to take place. Alternative behaviours must be available, attractive and practicable, but provision of information is vital because in its absence the alternatives, no matter how attractive they may be, will remain unknown and therefore unpracticable. Brown and Kuarl (in McAnany, 1980:20) put it more succinctly:

Skillful communication can change a peasant's perception of his situation but it cannot, acting alone, change that situation very much. It can help a farmer to see opportunities he might otherwise have missed but if few opportunities exist, information cannot create them.

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The centrality of information and communication to attitude change is evident in various media effect theories which seem to explain how powerful the media are. Up to the late 1930's there was a proclivity towards what was thought to be "direct effects", but in the 1940's the thinking radically changed to "no effect" theories, and this continued until the 1960's (Enemaku, 2001:4). But thereafter, some psychological and sociological inputs made the thinking to change to "limited effects". It was realised that media effects do not depend on the message alone but on some intervening variables between the media and their audience (ibid). This is the current thinking on the effects of mass media messages, i.e.

they may be powerful or influential to some extent (may be to a large extent,) but their effects do not depend on the message content alone but also on a number of social and psychological factors, including the state of mind of the message recipient; the availability or otherwise of alternative responses; the attractiveness or otherwise of such alternatives; the attitudes of the society to such alternatives, etc.

Nsi (in Akeredolu Ale (ed) 1993: 203) underscores the importance of communication by explaining that:

Public enlightenment have been a great source of inspiration to rural dwellers; for example when a programme focusing on our age-grade system and the provision of say, potable water or a town hall to a community is broadcast, such a programme forms a source of inspiration to other age-grades to provide similar or even better facilities for their own people.

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Moemeka (2000: xiii) corroborates this by explaining that:

Communication is so central to human existence and activities that without it the world as we know it would cease functioning. It is an imperative in education, business, government, sports, international affairs, development, social change, the family and so on.

Owens-Ibie (1999) also emphasises the importance of information and communication in attitude change, while Dare (in Oso and Adebayo, 1993:11) argues that:

In any serious effort to improve the conditions of the rural poor, information or communication has a role to play. It can be used to keep people thinking about development, to make them recognize and accept the need for development, to mobilize and make them predisposed toward development.

Having thus established the significance of information and communication in attitude change and development, it is important to identify some of the rural environmental problems in Nigeria before proffering communication strategies for dealing with them.

RURAL ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA

Okpara (1993: 153-161) identifies three main environmental degradation problems in Nigeria as (i) Desertification (ii) Soil erosion and (iii) Deforestation. He lists other area of environmental concern as (i) Global warming (ii) Ozone layer depletion and (iii) Depletion of biodiversity. Beyond these, the following specific environmental problems can be identified in the rural areas of Nigeria:

- (i) Desert encroachment on the northern fringes of Nigeria

- (ii) Flooding along the banks of rivers, lakes streams and other water channels.
- (iii) Bush burning
- (iv) Dumping of toxic waste by technologically advanced nations of the world
- (v) Gas flaring and oil spillage in the oil producing areas
- (vi) Improper refuse disposal
- (vii) Obnoxious fumes containing poisonous dangerous substances (such as lead, carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide) emitted by power generating sets, vehicles, etc.
- (viii) Indiscriminate felling of trees
- (ix) Land reclamation
- (x) Massive exploitation of land and sea resources without replenishment.

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This long list is by no means exhaustive, for there are several other forms of environmental problems confronting rural Nigeria, some of which have not even been put on the agenda for public discourse. This indicates that rural Nigeria, as safe as it is erroneously believed to be, is contending with myriads of environmental problems which must be urgently addressed, if they are not to get worse.

But before proffering a communication strategy, it is essential to identify some of the causative or exacerbative factors. These include the following among others:

- (a) Poverty
- (b) Illiteracy
- (c) Inadequacy of existing legislations
- (d) Ineffective mechanism for monitoring the rural environment
- (e) Inefficiency of law enforcement mechanism
- (f) Ineffective information and warning systems
- (g) Non-challant attitude of civil society
- (h) Cultural factors

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UTILISING THE MEDIA TO ADDRESS RURAL ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA

In utilizing the media to address the issue of rural environment and sustainable development in Nigeria, there are a number of significant considerations that must not be discounted. Prominent among these is the fact that the media, acting alone cannot bring about the required changes and development. As Dare (in Osó *et al*, 1993:11) notes,

...it would be futile to place the burden of integrated rural development or any kind of development for that matter on communication, however skillfully executed. Information can hardly make much difference if the structural constraints of the rural environment are not tackled, or at least kept constantly in focus.

The first step in ensuring the success of any communication strategy for developing environment-friendly attitudes among rural Nigerians is to eliminate structural constraints that may make alternative attitudes difficult or impossible for them to embrace. If for example, rural Nigerians are encouraged to use kerosene stove for cooking instead of firewood, the persistent shortage of kerosene in Nigeria could constitute an obstacle, and unless the obstacle is eliminated, the alternative being sold to the ruralites may only be a farce. Similarly, if rural farmers are encouraged to stop bush burning, the viable alternatives should not only be made available, but should also be made more attractive, otherwise, there could be a reluctance to accept the proposed alternative.

Another main structural obstacle to effective media use in rural environmental development in Nigeria is that the Nigerian political elite have certain vested interests that do not allow for real democratization and poverty alleviation. The political class wants to hold on to power at all cost; to perpetuate poverty and illiteracy; and to eliminate all forms of opposition. To achieve these, they strive to manipulate the media, and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) recently warned some state-owned broadcasting stations to either reflect the views of the opposition to achieve balance and fairness or risk losing their licences. Instances of victimization of journalists still abound in our democratic experiment, and

these are real threats to the environment because a political class that manipulates the media tampers with its own credibility and the credibility of the media, and when such media houses champion the cause of the environment, the audience may not take them seriously (Enemaku, 2001b:10).

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Message Design

Although communication, acting alone, cannot solve all environmental problems, it can significantly contribute to solving the problems, especially when appropriate messages are designed and disseminated through the proper channel to the right audiences. In designing the messages, it is essential to get the input of the target audience. In other words, in addition to determining demographic and psychographic components of the target audience, it would be more appropriate to actually get the audience involved in designing the message, taking into cognizance their beliefs, knowledge level, feelings and general disposition, on the subject. As George (in Bofo and George, 1991:50) puts it,

...involving members of the target group itself in the decision-making about message design and delivery will increase the effectiveness of the campaign better than any anthropological survey, however good it is.

It needs to be emphasized that good as the availability of demographic and psychographic data about the target audience may be, it is more profitable if such data are used for ensuring greater community participation in message design and dissemination. If such data are used only to aid top-down flow of information and communication, the ultimate goal of promoting sustainable rural environmental development might not be achieved. The premise of this contention is that it is possible to design and disseminate the wrong or the inappropriate message to the right audience.

It is important to recognize that all communities are not necessarily "bounded, homogenous entities, but socially differentiated and diverse" (Leach, Mearns and Scoones, 1997:5) and that "gender, caste, wealth, age, origins, and other aspects of social identity divide and crosscut so-called community boundaries". Even at that, the importance of community participation is not removed. If anything, it is re-inforced by the need to properly understand these social variables. Once such variables have been properly understood, members of the target audience should be involved in the process of designing apposite messages.

Media Selection

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In selecting the appropriate media mix for the dissemination of environment information to rural Nigerians, a number of other factors

must be put into consideration. The media mix that is suitable for the Fulani herdsman in the Northern part of Nigeria may not necessarily be the appropriate one for the Ijaw or Ilaje fisherman in the Southern part of the country. Again, it may be more appropriate to first of all interact with the target audience and obtain their input instead of sitting in an airconditioned office to decide which media are most suitable.

It is estimated that 80% of the Nigerian population are resident in the rural areas (Uche, 1999:21). Most of the rural dwellers are non-literate and rely largely on traditional communication systems. It then follows that for any media mix to be appropriate for communicating with Nigerian rural dwellers it must include an admixture of traditional communication systems as well as modern media of mass communication. But the situation on the ground indicates that most often only the mass media are relied upon in efforts to sensitise Nigerian rural dwellers to environmental issues.

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The issue of credibility also crops up here. Since Nigeria attained political independence in 1960, the Nigerian government has used the mass media to inform and misinform the people. As Dare (1993:10) put it,

Given decades of neglect and broken promises, the rural poor, perhaps even more so than the general public, have come to develop a built-in bias against information from a

government source. Media that have been used routinely to deceive or mislead the public: how can the same media now be employed to mobilize the same public for national development?

The crux of the matter here is that going by the low credibility of some organs of the mass media in Nigeria as a result of persistent misuse by the powers that be, it might not be proper to rely on these same media alone for mobilizing rural dwellers for environment-related actions. The search for appropriate media must embrace the traditional communication systems as well. The advantage of this approach is that the credibility of the modern communication systems can be boosted by the time-tested traditional communication systems among the rural populace which the people can more readily identify with and accept as their own reliable source of information.

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The importance of oral traditions in rural settlements, especially in Africa, cannot be over-emphasised. According to Rapanoel (in Bofo, 1991:11) "oral traditions can be considered as an important, if not the only, source of traditional and popular knowledge, practices and attitudes towards life in general." Moemeka (in Oso and Adebayo, 1993:67) also contend that "Any communication strategy which completely ignores traditional media cannot successfully win and retain the people's attention

for long." It is essential therefore, to ensure that any message directed at rural dwellers on change of attitude towards the environment should utilize both modern media of mass communication and traditional communication systems. But such media selection must be preceded by research to determine what is appropriate in each community.

It may be wrong to assume that a particular traditional medium that is accepted in one community will necessarily be accepted in the nearby communities. A study by Enemaku (1989) for example, indicates that the "alo" oral tradition among the Igala people of the then Benue state was a very popular and highly accepted method of transmitting attitudes, opinions, facts and other forms of information from one generation to the other. Yet studies among the neighbouring Tiv people in the same state indicates that the Kwaghir Puppet theatre is more popular and more appropriate for message dissemination among them than any other form of traditional communication.

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THE IMPERATIVE OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

For effective mobilization of rural dwellers for environmental action, communication research must be given a pride of place by those entrusted with the responsibility of evolving appropriate communication strategies. Such research will unearth a rich corpus of data which will in turn enrich the message design and media selection decisions. Research also helps to

identify the most appropriate time and place to expose environment-related messages, factors that are likely to be advantageous or disadvantageous and other important considerations. But most often, government officials and other media users assume excellent knowledge of the media and even the target audience without any conscious effort to determine factors that could promote or hinder the acceptance of media messages.

The Gender Factor

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A major constraint to the effectiveness of environment-related messages in Africa could be the tendency to overlook the important role of women. Steeves (in Uche, 1999: 27) reports that a major problem in development has been a failure to consider gender roles. In rural Nigeria, women play very significant roles that could impinge either negatively or positively on the environment. In addition to playing other important roles in the family, rural Nigerian women are actively involved in food planting; cultivation, harvesting, processing and other major activities relating to agriculture. Any message that omits to address women and their roles will eliminate a very important segment of the population, and this will be a major setback in the effort to evolve an effective strategy for combating environmental problems in rural Nigeria.

Women also exert a lot of influence on other members of the society i.e. men and children. This influence, if effectively harnessed, can be an important asset in entrenching life-long environment-friendly habits and attitudes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that communication strategies alone cannot sufficiently tackle rural environment and sustainable development issues in Nigeria. But when the required structures for positive attitude change are in place, communication can go a long way in helping to solve rural environment and development problems. The appropriate communication strategies are those that are democratic-participant, research-based and gender-sensitive.

Efforts to address environment-related problems cannot be effective where the target audiences are taken for granted; when the society says one thing and does another; where national corruption is institutionalized and where poverty, autocratic governance and other negative indices are allowed to have a free reign in the society.

“When a tree dries up at the top, something must have happened at its roots”. This Igala proverb encourages us to look beyond the surface and dig out environment and sustainable development options that can outlive our generation.

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