Language and Communication: A Tool for Technology Adoption, Self-Reliance and Substainable Develoment

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Abstract

This paper traces the developmental role and strategy that language and communication plays as a tool for national development in Nigeria. This paper is of the opinion that people and the use of language effectively are the pivotal tool for sustainable technological development in Nigeria. The paper concludes by stating that mass communication, national planners and policy makers are of vital importance to developing new skills in agriculture and technology. Peoples' attitudinal change through the use of language will bring about sustainable national development.

Key Words: Language, Communication, People, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

"People's participation is becoming the central issue of our time," says UNDP in its Human Development Report 1993, to which we add, "and participation requires language and communication".

Development programmes can only realise their full potential if knowledge and technology are shared effectively, and if populations are motivated and committed to achieve success. Unless people themselves are the driving

force of their own development, no amount of investment or provision of technology and inputs will bring about any lasting improvements in their living standards.

Language and Communication is central to this task in many ways. For example, it enables planners, when identifying and formulating development programs, to consult with people in order to take into account their needs, attitudes and traditional knowledge. Only with communication will the project beneficiaries become the principal actors to make development programs successful.

Helping people at all levels to communicate empowers them to recognize important issues and find common grounds for action, and builds a sense of identity and participation in order to implement their decisions.

On top of that, development involves change, new ways of doing things. Will people have the confidence to make a project work? Will they acquire the new knowledge and skills they need? How can barriers of illiteracy be overcome? Language and Communication media and techniques can be powerful tools to advise people about new ideas and methods, to encourage adoption of those ideas and methods, and to improve training overall.

Communication approaches are also invaluable for improved coordination and teamwork to manage development programmes, and to gain institutional support. We live in a communication age, and the full impact of communication on development is just starting to be seen. Based on the experience of FAO and other agencies, communication for development has reached the stage where it can have a noticeable and rewarding effect on many development programs.

This paper not only promotes the concept of development communication but, more importantly, it also describes how achieving its full potential to

support development requires executive decisions by national planners and policy-makers.

The Role of Language and Communication

A decisive role can be played by language and communication in promoting human development in today's new climate of social change. As the world moves towards greater democracy, decentralization and the market economy, conditions are becoming more favourable for people to start steering their own course of change. But it is vital to stimulate their awareness, participation and capabilities. Communication skills and technology are central to this task, but at present are often underutilized. Policies are needed that encourage effective planning and implementation of communication programs.

The New Development Context

Major changes and new emphases have appeared on the development scene.

Societies are opening to debate and markets to individual initiative; privatisation and entrepreneurship are being encouraged; new technologies are becoming widely available; management of government services is gradually being relocated closer to the users, if not handed over directly to users themselves, in order to cut costs and seek partners more committed to effective implementation. Indeed, a host of structural adjustments are profoundly affecting most aspects of production and human interaction. These structural adjustments make demands, and have direct economic and social effects on people. Nigeria Government can no longer fulfill all social and regulatory services by themselves, especially in rural areas. The Nigerian economy is overwhelmed by the cost of servicing its' foreign debt, and government is under stringent requirement from international financial institutions to reduce spending. In its' quest for greater cost-effectiveness in all its' operations, government must have the active support of, and a greater contribution from its' people. Government

is thus obliged to seek new and perhaps unfamiliar partners, ranging from local leaders to people in a variety of non-governmental organisations. These people are accordingly obliged to shoulder new and perhaps unfamiliar responsibilities.

Furthermore, as we near the end of the century, a number of specific issues have come clearly into focus as being central to socio-economic progress, equity, social stability, to the future of humanity- and perhaps even to its survival. The environment and its relation to sustainable agricultural development and food production present an enormous challenge. A prime consideration is the proper use and conservation of natural resources. These resources are often degraded at the hands of impoverished rural people who have no immediate alternative for meeting their needs for land on which to grow food, and for fuel wood. Their abuse of forest areas, with the negative consequences of soil erosion and dwindling water resources, will only be halted through new schemes of employment and income generation and through applying conservation techniques. Such solutions, however, will have to be made acceptable to local people, many of whom will need considerable encouragement and training in new skills. The provisions of Agenda 21, which emerged from the UN Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro (1992), will only become a reality through large-scale changes in attitudes and behaviour in societies worldwide. Population growth is exerting pressure on natural resources, on food production and on the ability of government to provide basic services and employment opportunities. Population growth depends on choices made by individuals. Helping people to make more informed choices by raising their awareness of the implications of family size and unwanted pregnancy, and of methods of contraception, requires much more than simply sending out messages. Instead it requires learning, from people and their leaders, how to make such issues socially acceptable and worthy of urgent action. Insight into people's underlying attitudes are needed before they can be helped to change their views.

Rural poverty continues to increase in many countries, accelerating urban migration and creating intolerable economic and social problems. The solution, of course, lies in the development of rural areas. Most rural communities are characterised by reliance on traditional knowledge and production systems, based strictly on what has worked for survival in the past. This has led to a view that rural communities are resistant to change, even though their traditional wisdom has been hard-won and its reasoning is sound. Planners need to take this into account, as the first step of any planning exercise. For this, and for all rural development activities, communication between local communities and national planners and policy-makers is of vital importance but unfortunately, in rural areas it is at its weakest.

Malnutrition is both a cause and a consequence of underdevelopment. Recent decades have seen consistent reductions in the daily per caput supply of calories in Nigeria. Nutritional well-being is not just a question of food availability and economics among families, however. It also depends on sufficient knowledge and acceptance of appropriate diets. At the planner's level, incorporating nutritional concerns into development initiatives for agriculture, food security, forestry, land use, exports and so forth requires an increased awareness of nutritional priorities since these are not spontaneously identified in such disciplines.

Women in development is another priority issue. Women shoulder most of the work in rural areas. Given the opportunity, women have shown themselves again and again to be highly responsive and responsible when helped to mobilise themselves, build upon available resources and produce sustainable results. Women need to learn additional technical and organisational skills and more women are needed at the centre of decision-making. Specific challenges where communication is vital include helping women's groups to increase their self-determination and to broaden the

dialogue between the sexes regarding rights, privileges and responsibilities.

The Common Denominators: People, Language and Communication

The first common theme running through the development issues just outlined is the human factor: the outcome will be based less on scientific and material inputs than on the people involved. For, even if our understanding of the development process is changing, there can be no doubt that its future shape, its pace, sustainability and ultimate direction - for better or worse - will be determined by people, and the level of their awareness, participation and skills. Investment in scientific and material inputs will bear no fruit without a parallel investment in "human capital" - in informing people, opening up avenues by which they may reach consensus for action, and developing the knowledge and skills needed to put material investments to the best use.

Communication is the second common theme in the issues outlined. For if development can be seen as a fabric woven out of the activities of millions of people, communication represents the essential thread that binds them together. On the one hand, communication as dialogue and debate occurs spontaneously in any time of social change. The increased freedom of expression in recent times has been almost simultaneous with changes in the global political structure.

On the other hand, it is communication as a deliberate intervention to affect social and economic change that holds the most interesting possibilities. A development strategy that uses communication approaches can reveal people's underlying attitudes and traditional wisdom, help people to adapt their views and to acquire new knowledge and skills, and spread new social messages to large audiences.

The planned use of communication techniques, activities and media gives people powerful tools both to experience change and actually to guide it.

An intensified exchange of ideas among all sectors of society can lead to the greater involvement of people in a common cause. This is a fundamental requirement for appropriate and sustainable development.

The Rural Dilemma

The primary focus of FAO's work in communication for development lies in rural areas, where the expertise and logistics required to communicate well with rural communities may seem daunting. Nearly 1 000 million people in developing countries, more than one-third of the adult population, are illiterate. Rural communities are often remote and difficult to reach; they lack the infrastructures and communication systems - such as newspapers, radios, televisions and telephones, as well as meeting rooms, offices and schools -that help townsfolk keep abreast of developments and function effectively as informed participants.

In rural areas, the challenge is to increase the quantity and accessibility of information, to ensure its exchange in appropriate ways, and to elicit more information from rural people themselves in order to guide development planning. The communication technology and know-how are available. We live in a communication era, with rapid expansion in the reach of mass media, and improved techniques for the interpersonal exchange of ideas. The advent of the c heap transistor radio, for example, has brought this medium to remote corners of even the least-developed countries, where a lack of electricity can be overcome by solar-powered transmitters and receivers. Video provides a good example of the technological advances in the communication field. Little more than a decade ago, video was a bulky and expensive medium. The basic kit for shooting in black and white included a camera and recorder weighing about 30 kg, a power supply, and often an electrical generator for fieldwork. Now video can be filmed in vivid color using a "camcorder". A semi-professional unit, including batteries, weighs less than 3 kg. The size and price of video equipment drop further every year helping the use of video playback to expand rapidly

everywhere, even to villages in remote rural areas. Preparation of printed materials with type, graphics and photographs, has also been revolutionised. The use of computers for desktop publishing has sharply reduced costs and production time, providing much greater access and versatility. Traditional and popular media such as folk theatre, dances, puppet shows and popular poetry, as well as rural press linked to literacy programmes, and audiovisual materials, can be highly effective channels for disseminating development information and for stimulating community action.

Much more is now known about the interpersonal communication skills development field workers need in order to function more effectively as agents of change with rural people. These skills include the use of techniques such as focus group discussions, illustrated discussion tools such as flipcharts that have been pretested to be effective for rural viewers, and other media such as video and audiovisuals that can be used to share ideas and cause reflection, or as part of a training methodology involving presentation, discussion and practice.
Interpersonal communication skills can improve activities at all levels, enhancing management, teamwork and the morale of personnel.

With such rapid advances in communication technology and know-how, the age of telecommunication for rural development may already be upon us. Solar-powered microwave links for telephone communication, facsimile machines and even satellite links, are increasingly reaching into rural areas of the world, offering the possibility of breaking their traditional isolation for the first time in history. In fact today the idea is being mooted that telecommunication learning centres could be established in villages of the developing world, with user-friendly computer terminals that would download interactive learning and management information programmes from a central supply, similar to a water or electricity service, with users paying modest charges for the time of actual use. The programmes could

be video images, sound and computer-type data. This technology already exists, and the speed with which it is becoming cheaper and more accessible is so rapid that the use of computers in the villages of developing countries may someday be part of a pragmatic strategy to reduce the rural-urban population shift and promote rural development.

Time for Communication for Development

Whether we come to see village learning centres equipped with a centrally linked computer terminal, or, instead, a more systematic use of traditional media for human development, the use of communication no longer depends on the availability of technology: it depends on the will and decisions of policymakers to exploit its potential. Already communication has been highly exploited for political and commercial aims. Now is the time for communication to be applied to development.

Recommendation

Any development programme that regards people as mere recipients, rather than as the actual creators of change and progress, usually fails. Consulting the people and actively involving them in making the decisions that will affect them virtually ensures the programme's success. In practical terms, effective planning must make a deliberate effort to determine what people want to do, can do and can continue to do in a sustainable way. To find this out, communication techniques go far beyond the simple question-and-answer survey. Meaningful discussion, generated by people trained in interpersonal communication skills, and audiovisual tools, such as video or radio, can help the community to identify its true problems and priorities and where its capabilities and needs lie. This self-analysis can help a community to generate realistic proposals for new development initiatives and stimulates tremendous interest to have these initiatives succeed. The views of rural people can also guide prospective work plans, preventing them from moving in the wrong direction. For example, agricultural research can be tied directly to what farmers really want and are capable of

using. A systematic communication process brings researchers and practitioners together.

A policy of communicating with people intensively before a development programme is even drafted, and taking into account their views, capabilities and needs as they see them, is the best insurance a planner can have. A communication process was initiated. Local people's attitudes and needs were elicited using video and audio recordings that were then played back to the communities themselves as a basis for discussion. People began to articulate more clearly the realities of their situation, their priorities and what they felt capable of achieving. A true dialogue between the rural communities and planners will result in development.

Dialogue can be initiated and guided by field staff who have good interpersonal communication skills. Discussion tools such as flipcharts, audio-cassettes, slides and even video, can be used to help people visualize and reflect upon their own reality. Rural radio too can be a popular forum where local people do most of the talking about technical and cultural topics. These activities can lead to a serious diagnosis of problems and a search for solutions.

Gaining people's participation always requires face-to-face work within the community in order to make a bridge of understanding. Communication skills and media help people to visualize and cross that bridge more swiftly. Rural populations, and women in particular, find it increasingly difficult to cope with rapidly changing social conditions, which often lead to the development of unsettling life-styles. For instance, in societies where marriage and childbearing no longer go together, the social and economic cost of teenage pregnancies weighs heavily on people's, and the nation's, resources. In others, rural youth, often from fatherless homes, increasingly rebels against parental poverty.

Pressed by peers, teenagers often drop out of school, fall for drugs, or end up in the gangs of city slums.

Communication can focus on the long and sensitive process of changing behaviour and life-styles. Quite recent communication research methodologies make it possible to gain insight into the underlying reasons why people adopt a certain life-style. Once this understanding is acquired, communication approaches can respond in a combination of ways. Mass media can raise awareness and public understanding of the social implications of problems such as adolescent fertility, AIDS or drug abuse. Other communication activities can bring about informed processes of change among the audiences they intend to reach. Interpersonal communication techniques such as peer counselling have the capacity to develop coping mechanisms, self-esteem and images of a better future among teenagers, especially if combined with group discussions and other tools which create a dialogue. Social communication activities based, for example, on street and village theatre, and using truly participatory methodologies, can pioneer attitudinal changes at the community level and stimulate nonthreatening environments in which teenagers wish to learn about life.

Building on those experiences, a population communication project in Nigeria may decide to invite grassroots artists, most of them might belong to the very audiences, the project is trying to reach, it could be a week-long workshop: drummers, dancers, musicians, actors, clowns and storytellers all come together. The result of this dynamic interaction between performers and communication facilitators is the production of a coherent package of songs and dances, stories and plays, village clowneries and drum shows, that use idiom, imagery, rhythm and humour to deal with a variety of population issues and lifestyles. All productions will then be pretested and integrated into a multimedia campaign which also used radio, audio cassettes, visuals, drama and print.

Conclusion

The dynamic strategy behind people's participation and community mobilisation is to release the energy of rural people by building their confidence to make decisions and carry them out as a community in a self-reliant way. and to grove that A. they benefit from such efforts. Communication activities can help people, even those from different social groups within a community, to share information and exchange ideas in a positive and productive fashion. This dialogue can be enriched by understanding how development issues affect them, discovering what others think in other communities, and seeing what other communities have achieved. These are effective methods to help people to reach a consensus and find common grounds for action, based on their own needs and capabilities.

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