

BRIDGING COMMUNICATION GAP FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges facing most developing nations today is the problem of rural underdevelopment. In Nigeria over 70% of the population lives in the rural areas, yet the rural sector has remained the most backward and neglected. This paper examines the sorry state of our rural areas, attempts to identify some of the factors that remain the bane of our rural development and suggests ways (that include the appropriate developmental and communication approaches) of engaging the rural population in order to make development sustainable. Otherwise the heavy burden of rural retardation will continue to drag our national development.

Introduction

The issue of sustainable development draws from the alternative paradigm of development which focuses largely on the human elements. The earlier models of development orchestrated by the Western and European scholars were concerned with economic growth and the replication of social and political order of the capitalist west in the developing world (Hulme & Turner, 1990). This approach apparently failed to stimulate the desired growth and development in the emergent nations and therefore shift in paradigm became inevitable (Soola, 2002). The alternative paradigm now focuses on people's participation and promotion of equal access, society's self reliance, self determination, cultural autonomy, ecological balance and human right. The aim here is to fulfill health care, nutrition, sanitation and shelter needs (Sidel, 1993; Yahaya, 2003). The term sustainable development was brought into common use by the World Commission of Environmental Development (The Brundland Commission) in 1987, calling for development that meets the needs of the present generation without comprising the needs of future generation (Onuoha, 2009). In other words, to be sustainable

is to provide for food, fibre, and other natural and social resources needed for survival for a group and to provide it in such a manner that maintains the essential resources for present and future generation (Wimberly, 1993 in Omotayo, 2002). For any nation to advance and realize its potentials, it must liberate the bulk of its people from want and deprivation, hunger and starvation, inequality and injustice. It must guarantee the freedom of its citizens and cater for their basic and essential needs while preserving their cultural identity and dignity as a people. This is the main thrust of sustainable development and achievable not only when the bulk of the rural poor are attuned with government policies and programmes but are also meaningfully engaged in all matters affecting their lives.

Rural development: the state of the matter

Rural development is targeted at improving the quality of life of the ordinary rural poor. Independent Policy Group (2003) sees rural development as a process of economic and social progress achieved through the participation of the people. It is the process of not only increasing the level of per capita in rural area but also the standard of living of the rural population

measured by food and nutrition level, health, education, housing, recreation and security (Diejomaoh, 1973 in Ayichi, 1995). Generally, the concept of rural development deals with promoting the welfare and productivity of rural communities, while at the same time ensuring that the rural people are involved, informed and motivated to participate in the planning of their own development and are empowered with skills required to improve the quality of their life (Imoh, 2013).

To say rural sector in Nigeria is marginalized and suffers serious neglect is putting it mildly. This fact has been acknowledged and lamented at various quarters (Directorate for Social Mobilisation, 1991; The Independent Policy Group, 2003; Udoaka, 1998). This sad phenomenon of the state of our rural areas is largely blamed on our approach to development. This is illustrated by Moemeka (1995:325) who states that:

This aversion to rural development has created a socio-political environment in which most leaders of developing nations practically take pride in lopsided development plans and activities, while holding out a banner of holistic national development. In spite of its obvious failures, the trickle down paradigm of development (preached in the 1960's) is still high priority for these political leaders. They appear to hold past belief that developing nations can truly develop in spite of the heavy burden of rural underdevelopment which has proven in no uncertain terms, over the years, to be a very forceful drag in national advancement. The result has been changed without development (improvement).

More saddening is the fact that many attempts of intervention by respective administrations through varied programmes at transforming the rural sector have not yielded the much desired result. Such programmes include

National Accelerated Food Programme, Integrated Agricultural Development Programmes, Operation Feed the Nation, River Basin Development Authorities, Green Revolution, Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure, etc (Maude, 2010; Ering, Oto, & Archibong, 2014). Africa Leadership Forum (1991) also observed that the impact of these various programmes on conditions our rural areas have been very insignificant considering the huge expenditure incurred. Omotayo (2002) locates the failure of these programmes on full scale corruption, non-involvement of beneficiary communities in project conception, planning and implementation and lack of consistency in policy (Omotayo, 2002). Imoh (2007) citing Ascroft and Melkote (1983) attributes the failure of most development programmes to pro-innovative, pro – literacy, pro-mass media and pro-urban biases in development messages which created false expectation, marginalized the non-literate rural population and entrenched elitism (Imoh, 2007). This grossly undermines the pattern of information flow in a typical rural setting in Nigeria where the people live, not via the mass media, but through interpersonal contacts made by local government officials, social groups, teachers, village health workers, extensionists and other workers who reside in the village or district (Imoh, 2013).

Moreover, despite identifying communication as crucial to rural development, a number of inherent gaps have continued to exist in communication strategies used for rural development programmes in Nigeria. Imoh (2007), for example has identified certain factors as communication gaps in rural development. He believed that:

i Communication efforts have lagged behind the technical and operational aspects of many grassroots development programmes. The

- involvement and participation of the people have been taken for granted and not included in work plans.
- ii There is the lack of integration of the efforts of the various institutions and organisations responsible for rural development at the local level with the result that there is inadequate political, financial and human support and commitment at the local level for development programme targeting the grassroots.
 - iii Evaluation of the programme at the grassroots have usually been quantitative and focussed on effects rather than process and as a result, it has been difficult to identify the contextual variables standing between the people and their participation in development activities in their communities.
 - iv There is limited mass media involvement in promotional activities. their role is often limited to fostering favourable attitudes towards government programmes rather than providing specific details of their adoption.
 - v There are limited interpersonal efforts by extension workers to reach the rural population scattered over large geographical areas, some of which are not accessible to mass media messages, outreach operations and static posts.
 - vi Communication with the people has not always used the channels most accessible and credible to the people. The field staff often lack the interpersonal and technical support needed to interact with the people optimally.
 - vii Very little attention is paid to the way in which traditional beliefs, practices and values of the people affect their responses to development messages. The influence that religious, traditional, youth, women and opinion leaders in the community have on peoples' decision to participate in development

programmes at the grassroots level has not been recognised with the result they are often not target of development messages.

- viii Efforts aimed at creating public awareness and support for programmes and ensuring cooperation and popular participation at the grassroots level are invisible.

As a result of the above serious shortcomings in communication strategies and several other factors as identified in the foregoing discussion, efforts in rural development have always failed to pay off. Rural poverty has continued to rise; ignorance and vulnerability predominate; hunger and diseases becoming widespread, with declining life expectancy and rising mortality rate. Sadly, Abdullahi (2009:329) declares, "The situation in Nigeria is that 70 percent of the population live in the rural areas but are denied access to modern communication channels and thus shut away from credible information on issues which affect their lives and communities. Most of them live and die, never having an appreciation of development and the possibility they could participate in a meaningful building of their county.

Bridging the development and communication gaps. The early development scholars (such as Wilbur Shramm, Daniel Learner and Everett Rogers) who preached the gospel of economic growth and modernization as bases for development, realized the inadequacies of such a paradigm which include its top – down approach and its inability to recognize the cultural differences that make development almost necessarily different culture country to country (Soola, 2002). This presupposes that the search light for development be focused on human beings as the subjects of development. Development should be needs – oriented, indigenous and should promote participation at all levels, enhance equal

access and society's self reliance taking into consideration local culture, values and norms. This popular participation, Soola (1995) argues is both a prerequisite to, and catalyst for sustainable socio-economic development and general societal well being. It is in consonant with the above position that Africa Leadership Forum (1991) identifies the following factors as crucial for the overall transformation of the rural areas in Nigeria:

- a) Demonstration of access to resources, institutions of government, information and knowledge;
- b) Effective participation of rural dwellers in the decision making process;
- c) Ability of rural communities to articulate their problem and needs in the context of the development programmes agencies;
- d) Ability of rural communities to deal decisively with problems of local development independently of direct central government assistance or involvement;
- e) Strengthening the capacity of communities to identify their basic problems, set their priorities and be able to utilize time sets of solution on their decision making process;
- f) Strengthening the capacity of communities to mobilize their resources, financial; and otherwise;
- g) Embracing community control over resources considered essential to their development.

This only becomes realizable with the appropriate communication strategy, seen as a co-equal knowledge – sharing process between users and source – a means to raise consciousness and community participation where goals and standards are set by host communities not outside agencies (Sidel, 1993). This is against the earlier theoretical models of communication of the 1960's that saw communication process as exchange of messages from a sender to a receiver with a lot of

importance given to the sender and the channel used (Yahaya, 2003; Castello & Braun, 2006). In other words, communication in the context of the rural communities should be interactive process in which information, knowledge and skill relevant for development are exchanged. The aim is to put rural people in a position to have the necessary information for informed decision – making and the relevant skills to improve their livelihood. Communication in this context is therefore a non-linear process with the content of data or information (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 2008). The purpose of communication here is to enhance clear understanding among community members for development projects and encourage group interaction for reaching appropriate decision on developmental issues. Babalola and Babalola (2004:328) observe that people may remain perfunctory to development due to their lack of understanding. They may refuse to make tangible resolution for change in themselves and their community if the whole idea of the said change looks puzzling to them. The only tool that could be applied to exchange such unfortunate esoteric belief to change is effective communication. It is when people understand through effective communication the need for change and development their interest is aroused.

Conclusion

It is the conclusion of this writer that the Nigeria's dream of meaningful development can only be realized when the bulk of its population in the rural areas is carried along. And this is achievable only when appropriate development approaches with commensurate communication strategies (that consider their needs, interests, aspirations and their culture and tradition as a people) are adopted. It is only then they can be integrated into the national economy. Otherwise the

whole nation will continue to pay the bitter price of rural underdevelopment. The most obvious is the rural-urban drift with its attendant social menace manifest in urban squalor, increase in crime rate and insurgency.

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