International Journal of Scientific Footprints

Addressing the Relevance of Indigenous Communication to Communicating for Development

Ifeyinwa Mbakogu[1]

[1]Doctoral Candidate, School of Social Work, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Abstract

Often, those involved in the formulation of development initiatives especially for rural areas in developing countries, lack the professional skills to understand reasons for the reluctance of rural targets of their programs to accept social change-no matter how relevant to the enhancement of their current standard of living. This paper addresses the role understanding the indigenous means of communication of target rural populations would play in the people's susceptibility to change agents and their development idea.

1. Indigenous Communication: a Necessary Introduction

It is imperative to begin this paper on indigenous communication with a word of caution. This is because understanding the term "indigenous" goes a long way to determine the components of the indigenous media. The term indigenous in its purest sense refers to the aboriginal or original people in any geographical area. Within my paper, indigenous people refer to: people still living the way (or almost the way) their ancestors did: people with a passionate association with the earth and its surrounding elements: people still maintaining their cultural heritage, beliefs and practices without adulteration by the negative or positive influences of modernization: people violently inimical to the maneuverings of change or change agents. Such original people to me, though difficult to find, still abound.

It was with the observation that humanity has persistently disregarded indigenous people in initiating development plans that the

International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004) was launched on 8 December 1994 by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The contention of the United Nations Secretary General was that:

"If we are serious about development, political participation and human rights, we must address the special situation of indigenous people… One thing is clear: the human and community rights of indigenous people will flourish best in an atmosphere of respect and mutual tolerance".

Also, major resolutions within the draft Declaration include:

- The right of indigenous people to be free and equal to all other individuals,
- Their right to self-determination: to freely determine their relationships with states and their political status, and to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development,
- The right of indigenous people to their lands, territories and resources,
- Their right to maintain their distinct identities and characteristics.

The aim of this preamble therefore, is to build a platform for the derivation of the term 'indigenous' and 'indigenous media' that will form the focus of the paper. It also begins by

showing the limitless reach of the indigenous media to include others who may not regard themselves as indigenous but rural dwellers. Most recorded development programs by change agents have been undertaken in rural areas that have witnessed a tinge of modernization. As such what obtains, is that in targeting rural dwellers, the indigenous media often acts as a support for modern mass media (radio, television, print and so on) techniques. Thus, it is often unlikely that the indigenous media is the sole tool for information dissemination.

In this paper, I will try to understand the concept of indigenous communication, how indigenous communication aids communicating for development, the benefit of blending indigenous communication with indigenous knowledge and participation of affected indigenous people in development missions.

1.1 Indigenous Communication: Understanding the Concept

Indigenous communication could have several meanings to professionals in different fields. This is because indigenous communication is essential to all fields of human endeavor where individuals have information to convey or services to render to a community. For the fulfillment of these roles, it is crucial to convey such intentions in a way, form or

manner that would be understood by recipients. Of course, this would entail using appropriate means of communication (language, media or message) that would be acceptable rather than offensive to the beliefs and cultural values of the recipients or target population. From this, it is evident that, indigenous communication encompasses several stages that may be taken for granted because the meanings and components forming its backbone and efficiency may be ignored. To offset these persistent inadequacies, I shall attempt a brief definition of indigenous communication before discussing how indigenous communication and the processes crucial to the adoption of indigenous communication channels enhance job efficiency for professional engaged in rural development.

2. What is Indigenous Communication?

With modernization, there was a need to imbibe technological skills that would make - work and communication easier. Although insufficient research has been carried out on indigenous communication, the realization that a majority of rural people do not obtain information on new technology through the media but from friends, relations, neighbors and people in related occupations, spurred the need for further research in this area as it would benefit both rural dwellers and community workers or policy makers. Although we may claim that indigenous communication became important to make up for the fall outs of the modern forms of communication in conveying information in both urban and rural areas in parts of Africa, others, may also see the increased new focus on indigenous communication as retracing our steps to the favored traditional mode of communication before colonization. Oduko (1987) with reference to Nigeria provides information on the form of communication that existed in the country before colonization and the reason for infiltration by modern forms of communication:

Before the introduction of printed material, radio, film and television, mass communication in Nigeria was done through the indigenous systems of communication. Western commerce, religion, education, politics and the form of government, imported from Britain from the 19th century, found the indigenous communications systems inadequate for several reasons: (1) the systems use local languages, (2) they are interactive in the form of several chains of face-to-face activities from the source or sources to the receivers, (3) they are exclusively integrated into local cultures; (4) they do not depend on Western technology and (5) they are

dissimilar from the Western model of mass communication.

Has the nature of indigenous communication changed since several African countries became independent from their colonial masters? No. In Nigeria for instance, where 521 language are spoken with nine of these languages considered extinct, diverse languages, implies diverse ethnic groups, religions and cultures, whose uniqueness or peculiarities may be difficult to accommodate within the more general or impersonal nature of mass media messages. It is for its emotional, personal and unique nature that Oduko (1987) sees the indigenous media as culturally rather than economically determined. In using indigenous communication therefore, it is pertinent to delve into the rural setting to depict the age-old method of passing information, skills, beliefs, norms, values or simply put, our heritage from one generation to the next. For instance, through indigenous channels - a King relays crucial information about an impending epidemic to his subjects; a father passes down skills of his trade to his son; and mothers teach their daughters secrets of child care, housekeeping and herbal secrets in a community out of touch with modern medicine or health care. As would be expected, some people may equate indigenous

communication with such mundane channels as talking drums, town criers, flutes and even the activities of rumormongers. Far from this, while these channels may be included, indigenous communication channels are much more elaborate, organized, efficient and relevant to modern society and varied development professions than students of social work or development communication ever imagined.

Mundy & Compton (1991/3:4) aptly described indigenous communication as comprising "…the channel of transmission of entertainment, news, persuasion, announcements and social exchange of every type-it is an important aspect of culture and the means by which a culture is preserved, handed down and adapted." And Van der Stichele (2000) amplifies the reach of indigenous communication by enumerating ways in which messages are passed on in rural settings: "…beating a special drum; songs (dance, work songs); village crier; using a bell; folk tales; proverbs; riddles; and ceremonial occasions like initiations, funerals, weddings..." In summary, folk media is the means already in existence at the village level by which indigenous people deliver important messages to each other (Ng'ombe, 2000).

The underlying principle guiding the use of indigenous communication channels is the

enhancement of development efforts in a nation where there is evident disparity in the allocation of limited resources to the citizenry in rural and urban localities. In other words, three things are evident:

I.   Effective communication is necessary if development efforts are to be successful-implying that a successfully transmitted development objective is the outcome of effectively planned and targeted indigenous communication.

II. Indigenous communication can only be functional if the indigenous knowledge of target communities is blended with the new knowledge being imparted through indigenous channels.

III. Participation of indigenous people rather than dogmatic acceptance of the ideas disseminated through indigenous channels is necessary for the communication effort to be deemed successful.

These elements are essential processes determining the success of indigenous communication for development purposes in any professional field.

3.   Indigenous Communication and Development Communication

To Paul Mundy (2000), effective communication is a prerequisite for the success of any development effort. This is so because communication "…helps spread new technologies, multiplying the impact of a project many times over. It ensures that a project takes into account the knowledge and wishes of local people-the project partners and clientele." Ramirez (1999) elaborates that:

"Communication for development is about aiding different types of actors interested in understanding needs and assessing opportunities jointly; it is about providing them with the methods and media to reach common meaning, and about enabling them to negotiate with other actors with contrasting perceptions and interests".

In effect, in communicating for development using indigenous channels, there is a constant need for all partners - the indigenous people and project implementers to share ideas and experiences to avoid losing lessons gained from the undertaken project. This involves as I address in this paper, a look at media selection and message content to enhance communication to best achieve development objectives.

3.1 Media selection and message content in communicating for development

In communicating for development, the selection of appropriate media is a delicate process. Mundy & Compton (1991/3: 1) add that: "…indigenous communication includes the transmission of entertainment, news, persuasion, announcements and social exchanges of every type." With such limitless messages that can be passed using the indigenous media, why is there is limited reach to target populations. Development workers, social workers and community development practitioners included may blame difficulty in effectively passing information across in indigenous settings to the fact that the indigenous way of communication is not written down but held as a traditional gift that is passed from one generation to the next. While there is merit in this argument and we acknowledge that available media for transmission of messages can range from mere leaflets to the mass media or from indigenous communication channels to more recently, the internet, in communicating with the indigenous people, indigenous communication channels are greatly preferred by the target population. It is also important to avoid disregarding the fact that the targets of development communication in rural settings may consider such exogenous systems as schools, bureaucracies and the mass media as encroaching concepts that limit the value and

survival of their preferred indigenous media (Mundy & Compton, 1991/3).

Research attest to the limited reach and/or accessibility of the mass media especially in developing countries (Essien, 2014; Moemeka, 1981; Mushengyezi; 2010) with Nigeria as a case in point, where power shortage and dependence on generating plants may limit people's access to messages via television, video, internet and even radio outlets. Additionally, low literacy levels (in some rural areas) and limited purchasing power might limit purchase of newspapers and magazines to urban areas. Mushengyezi (2010) adds that economic investments are not needed to access Africa's diverse indigenous media. Moreover as development workers, we should acknowledge that a medium that was appropriate in one communication situation with a particular group of people may be inappropriate with another group even in similar settings. In a world, that is fast becoming a global village, it is necessary for developing nations to stay in tune with the latest information on new technologies and market opportunities. The media is needed to close this yawning development gap. It also involves respect for the media most preferred by the target population and allowing for an effective blend of the strong points of the new

and older medium of communication to achieve development goals.

In communicating for development, it is necessary to keep the audience in mind in message design. Much as it is necessary for messages to be simple enough to be understood by a wide range of indigenous people, the message content should be made appropriate to their present needs; examples used should be those they are familiar with and motives of the message should enhance rather than limit their functioning. Similar to ideas that broadcasters should take cognizance of message content and packaging in Nigeria, Ugbuajah (1979) reinforces that 'typical African countries' comprise: Nations, Cities and Villages (or clans) and communication patterns among people within these areas should take cognizance of the culture, language and gender differentials existing within their target areas. Ugboaja (1979) adds that the setting will also determine the appropriate mode of communication to be adopted. Should the messages be transmitted at the village square, using the town crier, the grapevine, village or age grade meetings or cultural events? There is a lot of deliberation involved in communicating for development. The nature of this communication as with other communication exchanges that involve influencing the views of people towards a new

idea, should involve long periods of deliberation, negotiations and exploratory studies before arriving at what may be considered a workable communication plan. When people can identify their culture, way of life, familiar modes of transmitting information in the packaging of a development initiative or information about a social problem, they (target) are likely to be less suspicious and eventually more receptive to the message and the idea.

Understandably, it becomes a problem deciding appropriate methods for policy makers disseminating information for instance: on technology options to farmers or informing farmers of their needs and preferences for enhanced agricultural production; or for health workers faced with convincing native doctors that chaining and flogging the mentally ill may have minimal effect on their mental state. Achieving these laudable objectives could be tasking with an audience made up of indigenous people with different characteristics, educational levels, gender and occupational differences. The communication process will also be aided when it includes a plan of action that recognizes the knowledge and input of the target population.

4. Indigenous Communication and Indigenous Knowledge

M. S. Swaminathan, a leading agricultural scientist cited in Shore (1997) stresses that the rights of the traditional caretakers of our heritage should not be ignored for "…nothing yet protects the rights of indigenous farmers who harbor traditional domestic seed grains or tribal healers who understand the medicinal properties of wild plants to benefit from the commercialization of these resources." More interestingly, Norgaard (1984: 7) believes that "…traditional [Indigenous] Knowledge has been viewed as part of a romantic past, as the major obstacle to development, as a necessary starting point, and as a critical component of a cultural alternative to modernization." An attempt to ignore the knowledge of the people is almost tantamount to ignoring the indigenous people themselves (Mundy, 1993). For our purpose, an ingredient in protecting the rights of indigenous people is making them feel that their ideas make valuable contributions to the development and wellbeing of humanity. In addressing the value of indigenous knowledge to the enrichment of indigenous communication, certain things come to mind:

a) The need to conduct research into and make use of the indigenous knowledge, local experiences and cultural heritage of a people as key sources of information for development planning.

b) The need to encourage and reinforce literacy and education as well as support all expressions of cultural diversity.

c) The need to give attention to artistic means of communication or other means of popular expression, which are used by local communities.

It may then be said that in indigenous knowledge lies the cultural heritage (medicinal, agricultural, legal, family counseling, religion, rites of birth, adulthood, marriage and death) of a people that can only be retrieved by communicating with appropriate people (or opinion leaders) in the community and blending acquired indigenous knowledge with modern ideas for societal good. More related to our discussion, rural dwellers are willing to utilize technology that incorporate their indigenous knowledge, with information about such technology conveyed via indigenous communication channels. Little wonder that when the indigenous ideas of local people are totally ignored in policy making in favor of or complete reversal to a new technology or idea, the new idea is either a complete failure or faces high resistance (possibly before eventual acceptance) from the target population. Consider the case of

ignorant social workers on community development work who without conducting in-depth research on the cultural orientation of people in their project area, asked the local people to stop drinking from a stream that was found to be the cause of rising cases of river blindness in the region. Of course, the people rejected the advice offered by the social workers based on the belief that the guardian deity of their village mandated them to drink from nowhere else but the stream or face untold disaster. Who should rural dwellers lean towards in seeking what is considered 'real truth' before making decisions that will affect their health and wellbeing? It stands to reason that rural dwellers would lean towards an ancestral and guardian deity that has protected their village and ancestors for decades or centuries; than social workers who may only be temporary fixtures in their lives. Consequently, the relevance of indigenous knowledge becomes evident when it means that it allows rural people to be better understood and more effective persuasive techniques derived, with links to their communal knowledge to swing them towards a favored but more modern idea, technology or approach. Further, Rajesekaran, Martin & Warren (1993) assert that incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into social policy programs would help understand local people, bridge communication gap between outsiders and insiders, help outsiders understand local conditions and allow community workers to integrate, utilize and disseminate what already exists. Further, Mundy and Compton (1991/3:4) advocated the need to have a blend of indigenous communication and indigenous knowledge as a backup for the limited reach of exogenous or external channels (these include-mass media, schools, agricultural extension, bureaucracies).

Development initiatives are more acceptable when they are adapted to conform to a people's cultural environment and using media that the people consider familiar, credible and accessible or affordable. Little wonder that even with development programs that are not strictly within the locality of indigenous people, modern mass media, now uses a blend of indigenous media forms (folk theatre, vernacular, folk music and more) in modern television and radio scripts probably as a result of their persuasive, entertaining and spellbinding potential. It is therefore evident that before policy makers set out to determine the technological needs of a people, those local custodians of traditional knowledge – farmers, landless laborers, women, rural artisans, fishermen, herbalists and cattle rearers should be consulted. This is because they would best advice about not only what

would work in their locality, but the effect, negative or positive - that adopting such a technology would have on their people (Butler & Waud, 1990).

5. Indigenous Communication and Participation

It should be anticipated that development programs directed at indigenous people may be unsuccessful when not only alien or unfamiliar and unaffordable communication channels are used to convey important information to them but their need to participate in decisions that will affect their lives is ignored. In relation to this, Mbakogu (2004:90) cautions that: "…regardless of channels used, communication can have relative success when there is a correlation between channel choice and appropriate audience analysis." The audience or target population is a key to any information dissemination quest and understanding the audience, entails, understanding means of endearing them towards a particular message or development idea. For instance, I will cite the laudable USAID program that set out to build public toilets in one of the remote villages in Lagos State, Nigeria. Of course, the toilets were abandoned after construction and commissioning by the state governor. Why? Because the felt needs of the remote indigenous dwellers were ignored. Also, the

people considered it a taboo punishable by the gods to defecate using such outlandish methods. Building on the cited example, again, Mbakogu (2004: 90) summaries that:

"the slow rate with which rural communities accept technological improvement that could enhance their health, economic, agricultural or living standards, could be related to the fact that "preferred" channels of message dissemination are separated from their environments or cultural beliefs".

Such development errors have a lot to do with how change agents enter rural communities and the opinion leaders within the community they meet to appropriately guide them in sampling, identifying and attending to the community needs and using appropriate indigenous channels to endear the people to the new initiative. According to Riley (2009), development communication appears more acceptable when they are seen to situate a person within familiar environments, depicting familiar behaviors and social relationships. From a World Bank report, there are at least 250 million indigenous people or tribes in about 70 countries worldwide yet the needs of these indigenous people are consistently ignored in development plans. Rather what obtains is that their abundant resources are exploited for the development of urban centers while the

exploited remain in perpetual poverty. It is sad that when programs are initiated for the benefit of indigenous people, they are done in such a haughty manner that their indigenous knowledge is scorned and assimilation of a strange culture emphasized. Expectedly, this aggravates the problems of poverty, social marginalization and ethnic resistance to change agents (Davis & Soeftestad: 1995); and encourages the perception of the mass media as unbelievable and glamorous (Essien, 2014).

The major consternation in emphasizing the need to encourage the participation of indigenous people in the preparation and administration of development plans directed at them is entrenched in the notion that communication is often successful when the target audience feels a sense of identification with the message content. More explicitly and with deeper insight into those characteristics that spur an indigenous audiences' identification with message content, Davis & Soeftestad (1995) reflect that:

"the characteristics which distinguish indigenous peoples include their strong attachment to the land, their dependence on renewable natural resources, subsistence practices, distinct languages and cultures, their historical identities as distinct people, and often mistrust of outsiders. For development institutions and planners, the challenge is how to incorporate such diversity of culture, language, ecological adaptation and history into development planning".

From the preceding, it is evident that the cultural outlooks, language and ecological adaptation of rural people could pose problems for policy makers interested in identifying their needs (felt and immediate) and mapping appropriate communication techniques for meeting those needs. Notwithstanding, there is the presumption that by getting rural people to participate in projects affecting their economic, social and cultural development, their interest is awakened, they become more affable in making suggestions about even communication channels that have either worked or failed in the past and eventually, the quality of undertaken projects is improved. In other words, participation of the affected is a key ingredient to successful communication whether at the indigenous or urban level.

6. Conclusion

While this paper did not set out to fight the course of indigenous people, one cannot but acknowledge that development though necessary should respect the rights of a people to still cling to even a string of that which

forges a necessary link with the past. This is not to assert that a people should not benefit from such necessary educational, health and agricultural initiatives that make them part of their great nation. The issue is that when development efforts are not flexible enough to recognize diversities in human beings and their needs, then communication strategies explored to transmit such development initiatives, whether rudimentary or advanced would definitely miss the target and be unsuccessful.

References

[1] Butler, L., & Waud, J. (1990). Strengthening Extension Through the Concepts of Farming Systems Research and Extension (FSR/E) and Sustainability. Journal of Farming Systems Research-Extension, 1, 1, 77 - 98.

[2] Davis, S., & Soeftestad, L. (1995). Participation and Indigenous Peoples. Participation Sourcebook. June, No.21.

[3] Essien, C, (2014). Indigenous Media and Rural Development: The Case of Oil Producing Communities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies. 4, 2, 16 – 31.

[4] INTERNATIONAL DECADE [of the World's Indigenous People] 1995-2004.United Nations Department of Public Information December 1994

[5] Mbakogu, I. (2004). Forging a link between indigenous communication, effective community social work practice and national development. Stud. Tribals, 2, 2, 89 - 95.

[6] Moemeka, A. (1981). Local radio, community education for development. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press.

[7] Mundy, P., & Compton, L. (1991). Indigenous communication and indigenous knowledge. Development communication report, 74, 3, 1 - 3.

[8] Mundy, P. (1993). Indigenous knowledge and communication: current approaches. Journal of the Society for International Development. Retrieved, September 1, 2015 from http://www.mamud.com/Docs/ik_and_ic.pdf

[9] Mundy, P. (2000). Development Communication Website

[10] Mushengyezi, A. (2003). Rethinking indigenous media: rituals, 'talking' drums and orality as

forms of public communication in Uganda. Journal of African Cultural Studies, 16(1), 107-117.

[11]   Ng'ombe, J. (1999). The Communication Model and Folk Media in Development. Folk and traditional media for rural development, [A workshop held in Malawi] Sustainable Development Department (SD), Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) SDdimensions July 1999.

[12]   Norgaard, R. (1984). Traditional Agricultural Knowledge: Past Performance. Future Prospects, and Institutional Implications. American Journal of Agricultural Economics No.66: 874-878.

[13]   Oduko, S. (1987). From indigenous communication to modern television: A reflection of political development in Nigeria. Africa Media Review, 1, 3, 1-10.

[14]   Ramirez, R. (1999). Communication: a meeting ground for sustainable development. Special: The first mile of connectivity, Sustainable Development Department (SD), Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) SDdimensions July 1999.

[15]   Rajasekaran, B., Martin, R. & Warren, D. (1993). A Framework for incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into agricultural extension. IK Monitor (3).

[16]   Riley, M. (1990). Indigenous resources in Africa: Unexplored communication potential. Howard Journal of Communications, 2, 3, 301 - 314.

[17]   Shore, K. (1997). Protecting Biodiversity: Toward the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Genetic Resources. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre (IDRC). June 20,1997.

[18]   Ugboajah, F. (1979). Developing indigenous communication in Nigeria. Journal of communication, 29, 4, 40 - 45.

[19]   Van der Stichele, P. (2000). Folk and traditional media for rural development. [A workshop held in Malawi] Sustainable Development Department (SD), Food and Agricultural Organization of the

United Nations (FAO) SDdimensions   January 2000.