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Organizations: New Directions for Development Communication

Dr Chukwuka Onwumechili, *Howard University*



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Organizations: New Directions for Development Communication

By Chuka Onwumechili

Abstract

This paper makes a case for the study of organizational communication as essential to development communication. It briefly traces the history of development communication and how mass media became synonymous with development communication. The assumptions underlying mass media's pre-eminence is revisited in order to make a case for organizational communication in an African environment. In the later sections, it describes a model for the study of development systems and organizational communication components.

Dr. Chuka Onwumechili is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communications, Bowie State University, Bowie, Maryland, USA. He was an Information Officer in the Anambra State Ministry of Information and an NYSC journalist for the Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation, both in Nigeria.

Les Organisations: De Nouvelles Orientations Pour la Communication du Developpement

Par Chuka Onwumechili

Résumé:

Ce chapitre est consacré à l'étude de la communication dans le domaine de l'organisation. L'auteur essaye de montrer que cela fait l'un des composants essentiels de la communication du développement. On trace brièvement l'histoire de la communication du développement. L'auteur montre également comment les masses média sont devenus synonymes de la communication du développement. Il analyse les suppositions à la base de l'importance accordée aux masses média, dans le but de justifier la communication de l'organisation dans le contexte africain. Dans les sections ultérieures cet auteur décrit un modèle d'un système de développement qui permet de voir le fonctionnement des composants divers de la communication de l'organisation.

Dr. Chuka Onwumechili est Professeur Assistant, dans le Département des Communications, à l'Université de l'Etat de Bowie, à Bowie, Maryland, aux Etats Unis d'Amérique. Il fut antérieurement officier d'Informations au Ministère d'Informations à l'Etat d'Anambra, et journaliste à la Corporation de Radio de l'Etat d'Ogun, au Nigeria.

Introduction

Communication analysis in African development studies have, in the main, focused on the uses of mass media such as broadcast and print (Hachten, 1971; Wilcox, 1975; Chimutengwende, 1988; and Matovu, 1990), new telecommunication media (Jayjay, 1992 and Ngcaba, 1992), and film (Sauer, 1992). Largely, the use of other communication contexts such as interpersonal, small groups, and organizations have been ignored. The ultimate assumptions for this focus are that (1) the mass media represent the only essential type of communication for national development, (2) other communication contexts such as organizational communication are not or cannot be related to national development, and (3) the "western-style" communication messages of the mass media are more attuned to development than the more 'culture-sensitive' messages in organizational communications. This paper intends to discuss the above assumptions. It will argue for the importance of a complementary focus on organizations and clarify areas of research in development communication within organizations.

Historical importance of mass media

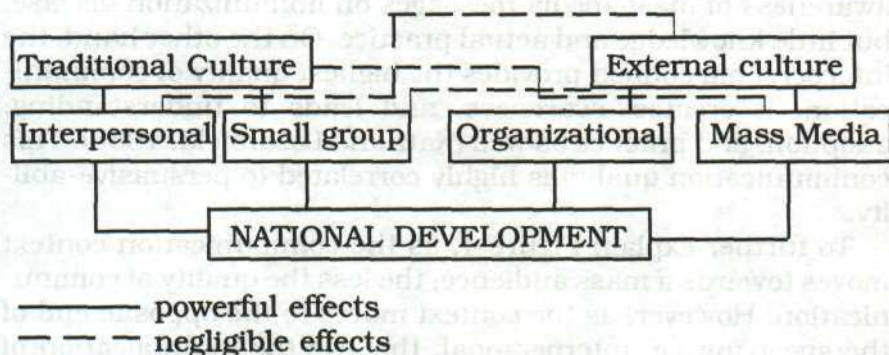
Mass media's perceived preeminence began with the recognition of communication as an important component of national development during the late 1940's (Lerner, 1958). Mass media were seen as essential in mobilizing and educating masses of people about development programmes. This period coincided with the period of the "all powerful" effects of mass media. It was the same period when most African countries were also struggling for national independence. Most of the overt communications were in the print and radio media. The colonial government used the media— e.g. South African Press Agency (SAPA) and British East African Broadcasting Company— to mobilize and educate the public about its programmes. In other cases, the media were used to impose certain value systems, such as in the Southern African region where they were used to "consolidate

the values of the white settlers and middle-class Indian businessmen by creating a security community through information" (Churchill, 1991:22). In several African countries, anti-colonial media arose to join the fight for national independence. Again, the anti-colonial media sought to mobilize against the colonialists and educate indigenes about the injustices perpetrated by the colonial governments.

Schramm and Lerner (1976), who were leaders in the recognition of communication's importance to national development, concentrated their studies exclusively on the uses or potential uses of mass media in the developing regions. They validated both mass mobilization and education among several other functions of development communication.

Since these earlier studies and since the independence of several African countries, the mass media have become *de facto* media for national development. Several African governments or ruling parties have operated mass media channels to mobilize, educate, and unify culture for national development. Examples of such are: Tanzania (*Daily News*), Nigeria (*Nigerian Television Authority*), Egypt (*National Television channels One and Two*), Kenya (*Kenya Times*), Ghana (*Daily Graphic*), and Swaziland (*Swaziland Broadcasting and Information Service (SBIS)*). This continent-wide ownership of mass media channels by national governments has made mass media synonymous with development communication. In addition, it has culminated in the identification of mass media as the sole medium context in the new development theory. This popularity of mass media has also led to the dearth of studies of other types of development communication contexts such as interpersonal, group, or organizational.

Figure 1: Cultural effects on communication contexts for national development



Case for Organizational Communication

All communication contexts — interpersonal, group, organizational, and mass — are, however, effective in development communication (see Figure 1). Each context involves interaction between or among two or more individuals. The essence of development communication is to (1) *educate* i.e. impart knowledge, and (2) *mobilize* i.e. prepare or get ready. Both can be achieved at the lowest level of communication context — the interpersonal context. Since each context can be critical to national development, one can say that national development begins at the interpersonal level. At such a level, the mutual exchange of information is critical to the individual's development. National development essentially reflects the aggregation of individual willingness to improve national capacity for production and self reliance. Mass mobilization and persuasive education are necessary to achieve the above aggregation.

The interpersonal, of all contexts in Figure 1, is the most persuasive. Studies (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Krugman, 1980; Servaes, 1991) indicate that personal is more effective than mass media channels in getting people to understand, adopt or practice. Mass media create awareness but not much knowledge. Nyirenda (1986), for instance, reported a study of

children's and women's vaccination in Zambia which demonstrates mass media limitation. He found significantly high awareness of mass media messages on immunization disease, but little knowledge and actual practice. On the other hand, the interpersonal context provides the highest quality of communication. It creates awareness, and leads to understanding, adoption, and practice as well (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). This communication quality is highly correlated to persuasive-ability.

To further explain Figure 1, as the communication context moves towards a mass audience, the less the quality of communication. However, as the context moves to the opposite end of the spectrum i.e. interpersonal, the less the multiplication of influence. Here, multiplication of influence refers to the number of individuals that may be influenced at a single defined period of interaction. This essentially correlates with the potential for mass mobilization. Thus, the ultimate goal for development communication is to find the right balance between quality and multiplication of influence.

Organizational communication provides that comfortable balance, at least better than what may be provided at both interpersonal and small group communication contexts. The significance of organization communication is (1) it provides a context where members know each other relatively well to achieve quality communication and (2) the number of members is large enough to achieve an appreciable multiplication of influence. The two reasons presented above provide both mobilization and education opportunity for development communication in Africa. But one may ask how organizational communication can be applied in rural development. The truth of the matter is that organizations, both at formal and informal levels, already exist in the rural areas. There are women-only organizations, local councils, youth organizations, and cooperative organizations. In any case, both interpersonal and small group contexts do not achieve a better multiplication of influence.

Culture and Communication

Most important, however, is the effect of culture on the communication contexts (see Figure 1). Mass media, for instance, are negligibly effected by traditional African culture. In the past, the failures of Western-style mass media as sole instruments of development communication in Africa have invoked the call for "oramedia"(Awa, 1989; Ugboajah, 1985; and Sarpong, 1974). "Oramedia" are traditional media rooted in African culture. Figure 1 does not include "oramedia." This is because "oramedia" are rarely used in most national development communication plans of African countries (Riley, 1990; Awa, 1989) .

On the contrary, organizational communication is affected by both traditional and external culture. Organizational communication involves "culture-sensitive" messages i.e. messages dominated by shared cultural values. These messages are culture sensitive because of the following reasons: (1) the proximity of the source to the receiver in organizations increases the chance that the participants share the same values, experiences, beliefs, meanings and (2) a substantial amount of communication messages in organizations are informal i.e they do not follow a specified, rigid, and often documented format.

Proximity of participants is critical in determining culture. Hall (1992) points out that "shared group membership is the ultimate form of culture. Certainly shared values, meanings, acts, and so forth, are culture" (p.52). Shared group membership provides organization members with the shared cultural background to exchange communication messages that are "culture sensitive."

Traditionally, African communication is oral-oriented (Ugboajah, 1985; and Awa, 1989). This has meant that a substantial amount of organizational communication is oral and, therefore, more likely to be informal. Informal communication usually involves closely knit groups in organizations. Group membership is extended to members of the extended family. Within groups messages, therefore, are shared with people of the same extended family, ethnic group, and culture.

Mass media messages, contrarily, are designed for masses or large audiences that include several differing groups. Such messages, therefore, exhibit much more cultural distance from their audience when compared to organizational communication messages. In ethnically-diverse African countries, for example, mass media messages are couched in a Western-style format (Golding, 1977 and Adesonaye, 1990) and are often delivered in the national "business" language, which is often English, French, or Portuguese, in order to reach a national audience.

Mass media messages are also formal. They are delivered in an orderly, regular and methodical format. This format is decidedly Western and is learned in journalism schools (Mohammed, 1990). Organizational communication messages can, however, be either formal or informal. It is formal when it is methodical such as reports, memos, order forms, and other similar work-related communication. When the communication is informal, its format is more likely to be culture-determined since informal communication tends to occur amongst members of the same group (Peil, 1977 and Hall, 1992).

Despite the above discussions, one must remember that mass media of all other communication contexts generate the highest multiplicity of audience, and therefore remain complementary for national development. Conversely, interpersonal and group communication provide high communication quality and are extensively effected by traditional culture, but they provide low multiplicity of audience. Organizational communication context should also be considered complementary for national development. It is at the organizational level that both traditional culture and relatively high multiplicity of communication influence exist.

Organizations and Development Communication: Areas of Focus

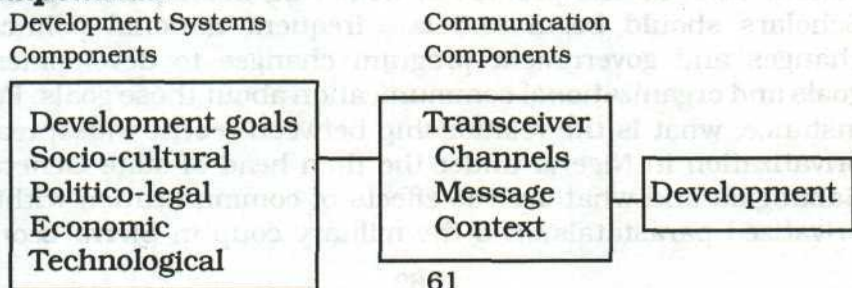
Kiggundu et al. (1983) have remarked that the systematic explorations of the environment and cultural variables and how

management can control organizational effectiveness are just beginning to take place. A search of the literature for relevant work in the area of organizational communication, effectiveness, and culture in Africa provides little help. There is little on the subject, represented by Kiggundu's works in the last two decades; Adu (1965), Onyemelukwe (1973), Appiah (1980), Nzelibe (1981), Hyden (1983), Damachi (1986), Balogun (1986), Kagwe (1987), Nzelibe and Nwanko (1990), and Onwumechili (1994) .

What is left to be investigated in the field is broad and yet very important. In this section we will look at several components of the development system and how they are related to the organizational communication medium. Development system components are those factors that impinge on national development all over Africa. Such factors are development goals, socio-cultural, politico-legal, economic, and technological. The socio-cultural factor has been extensively analyzed as the effects of traditional and external culture in Figure 1 above.

Figure 2 models the effect that development system components have on organizational communication and, for that matter, any other communication context. The importance of the above statement is two-fold: (1) that planners of organizational communication must discover the intricate relationships within and outside development system components, and (2) that researchers and scholars should understand the above relationships and design further studies with these relationships as guide. Now let us describe each of the elements under the development system components.

Figure 2: Model for the study of relationships between development systems and organizational communication components.



Development System Components

Clearly, the goals of development in Africa in the past three decades have focused on self-reliance through sustainable productivity; realization of full human potential through empowerment, equity, and increase of human capacity; and national cultural unity. These goals are highly interrelated with other development system components such as socio-cultural factors.

The socio-cultural factors are what define the African situation as unique. Mbiti (1975) and Obeng-Quaidoo(1985) have outlined core cultural values that differentiate the African environment from the Western world. Those values were listed as the relationship of Africans to a Supreme God as well as lesser gods; the concept of time as subject, rather than central, to human existence, and death as reincarnation of humans to the level of spirits; concept of work as a means to an end rather than an end in itself; and the concept of non-individuality where interdependence is valued more than independence.

In addition, Kiggundu (1986 and 1989), Onyemelukwe (1973), Nzelize (1981), and Appiah (1980) have all outlined the socio-cultural peculiarity of the African organization. Their major conclusions were that the African organization featured high collectivism demonstrated in the extended kinship system; an orientation towards the past and present without the consideration towards the future; paternalistic climate; and high power distance in the workplace.

Another inter-related component is the politico-legal. This is much like the socio-cultural aspect. It interacts with other factors such as the process of achieving development goals. Scholars should begin to relate frequent national political changes and government program changes to development goals and organizational communication about those goals. For instance, what is the relationship between recent widespread privatization in Nigeria under the then head-of-state General Babangida and what are the effects of communication within privatized parastatals? Did the military coup in Sierra Leone

affect communication between organizations considered critical to Sierra Leone's development? Will ANC's ascendancy to power in South Africa affect the focus of organizational communication messages?

There are also economic effects. Such effects may be related to recession, depression, or recovery. The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) now adopted by most African countries are surely affecting development communication programmes. Such programmes, however, are rarely studied by communication scholars. Instead, economists have monopolized such studies. Would it not be of importance to find out the relationship between economic improvement in Ghana and the organizational communication climate within Ghana's federal ministries? Would it not be valuable to investigate the relationship between interorganizational communication in Egyptian government offices and the Egyptian economy?

Technology is another emerging component that promises to become increasingly critical in development communication. The problem of organizations communicating with rural consumers of organizational products may well be inter-related with improvements in technology. Difficulties in communicating with rural communities have often been attributed to poor facilities, especially roads, electricity, and telephone lines. New wireless telecommunication technology may overcome these barriers. Essentially, African culture is being affected daily by technology and we must begin to acknowledge this with new studies.

What is needed is for scholars to begin to focus on these various aspects of development system components. The components remain uniquely African and critical to national development goals. This is because of the interaction between and among each of the factors and primarily because of the unique African socio-cultural environment.

Organizational Communication Components

The basic communication components are universal. These are the source, receiver, channel, and message. Each communication component has a large number of variables that effect organizational interaction with the development communication components. The source and receiver frequently interchange during interaction and those involved in such communication exchange are referred to as transceivers. In Figure 2, we have added a fifth component-context-which is accepted as critical in all communication.

One may inquire as to why it is necessary to include "context" as an organizational communication component. It had been discussed as environmental context under the name development system components. The answer is that "context," under organizational communication components, is directly related to the immediate situation guiding an interaction. It is a more temporal context. Examples include each organizational meeting, each report-writing session, and each contract evaluation session.

We go back to the discussion of basic communication components. The transceiver variables involve leader style (Nzelibe, 1981), attitudes (Nzelibe, 1981), personal goals and perception, among numerous others. Most of these variables are widely understudied in the African development communication context. The same can be said of other variables that emanate from the channel and message components. Such variables include formal/informal and verbal/nonverbal modes of communication channels within an organization. Examples of formal channels include organizational meetings and supervisor briefings. Informal channels include discussions during recess at *bukas*¹ and other types of socializing channels. Messages can be classified as human, innovative, maintenance, and task.

These classifications, though Western derived, are basic to communication. In Africa, the differentiation between human and other types of messages may not be as apparent as in the West. In Africa, human aspects of messages such as acceptance

and interpersonal relationships are expected and included in other message types because of the cultural value of collectivism.

Essentially, one hopes that we all recognize a vast opportunity that is awaiting further research. The possible matrixes of relationships are quite numerous and may hold the answer to successful development communication in Africa.

Conclusions

This paper did not set out to claim that organizational communication provides the only sure path to development communication. For one to make such a claim would be absurd. In fact, none of the communication contexts, alone, can lead to successful development communication on the continent. The contexts are all complementary in the search for successful development communication.

This paper has focused on organizational development communication because the literature has indicated a paucity of research in this area in Africa. It has, therefore, attempted to create an awareness of this insufficiency by presenting reasons such as the belief that *mass* mobilization and education was the sole key to development communication. Such a belief meant that mass media became a predominant solution. We then make a case for organizational communication as a context that provides a comfortable balance in *quality* communication, culture-sensitive messages, and *multiplication* of the influence necessary for efficient development communication. We then outline the various matrixes of relationships, in the development system and communication, that need further investigation in the search for successful development communication.

End Note

1. Cafeteria that are built near offices. These are often temporary eating places. They are numerous in urban areas.

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