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## Communication as an Instrument for Enhancing Positive Change

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### Abstract

*Communication is no doubt central to life. Without it, all aspects of human endeavor are bound to be in jeopardy – from the home, school, business, relationships, organizations and institutions, name it. It is important that people accept and also participate fully in any process at all; they have to be adequately equipped with the requisite information or details about the said process. This will hopefully eradicate ignorance which is often exhibited so that the sought-after development can be promoted and participation enhanced in the long run. This paper however appraises the role of communication in enhancing positive change with specific implications for a developing country like Nigeria. Other aspects of the paper include: conceptual framework on positive change vis-à-vis development; communication and change; aspects of communication/development; factors for and against change effort. Thus, the paper recommends that when resistance is in the way of change, a well-planned and executed development communication effort geared towards re-education and carried out within the target social system on a dialogical basis can suffice.*

### **Introduction**

Positive change as a concept is encompassing as it covers all-round change: political, cultural, socio-economic, religious, behavioral or attitudinal. It is a key concept in development support communication which focuses on society in general with the hope of overcoming present malaise and realizing a better future. Positive change can therefore be used interchangeably to mean development. What then is development/positive change?

Development/positive change has many meanings. It could be described as a process (pace of change) or as a condition. It either describes some rate of change like economic growth or indicates a general level socio-economic welfare or social equality. Ramaswamy (2004, p.411) says "development denotes the process of economic growth, per capita income and the fundamental changes in the country to facilitate and generate that growth". She continues that commonly, these include industrialization, the migration of labor to more industrial areas, division of labor, changes in productive relations and steady increase in investments.

Other fields like political theory and economics view development as economic growth because of the assumption that growth ensures well-being. The criticism therefore is that such viewpoint captures only the economic aspect. The truth is that change or development is something more than that. It is a complex term as stated earlier and ought to relate to the quality of humankind. According to Sinha (1986), he sees development in its crudest form as an increase in per capita income and betterment of life. Mowlana and Wilson (1990) say it is a conceptual framework for a number of individual, institutional and international changes.

To Crocker (1993), the term should be replaced by words such as 'progress', 'transformation', 'beneficial change', 'liberation' or in some cases, even 'revolution'.

However, Mercado's (1992) definition draws us to a fuller understanding of the meaning of development as it stands to affect the welfare of the people particularly rural transformation and empowerment. According to him, development is a process of providing disadvantaged people the opportunities to analyze and improve their productivity of available resources within their environment in order to improve the quality of their life and the society where they belong. All these boil down to advancement socially, materially and otherwise. Change is said to be positive when the people's lives have been reasonably improved upon. The paper examines the role of communication in facilitating the change process, aspects of communication for the purpose of development, obstacles to change and the way forward.

### **Conceptual Framework: Communication and Change**

Communication is vital to life and without it, change would be inevitable. Udomisor (2007) observes that communication is a vital asset for any living organism. Without it, individuals, groups and development would find themselves irrelevant in the scheme of things and especially development.

Since the dawn of civilization, communication and development have depended on each other. To this end, Sinha (1986) asserts that this scenario explains more the significant place of communication in man's effort to conquer the forces of nature in order to make the universe a better place for all human habitation. Sinha (1986) goes on to say that communication in all respect is associated with every aspect of human growth, evolution and development. As an integral part of human and social life, communication becomes a crucial factor as well as a driving force in the acculturation process.

Most scholars who undertake the study of communication and its attendant



effect on human endeavor contend that in most, if not all developing societies, communication came forcefully into the political and social life of the people first, as a revolutionary tool of freedom and later, it was re-oriented to assist as an instrument of development.

Consequently, communication can be viewed in the words of Sinha (1986) as the transfer of information from one place to another in a desired direction with an expectation to bring about a desired effect. In the same vein, Ngugi (1995) cites Olivier (1993) as saying that communication is the transfer of ideas or knowledge in ways that enable the recipients to understand, react to and act upon the information received. Mercado (1992) also explains that communication is a process of sharing messages between a source and the receiver either directly or through a channel. It can also be defined as the process of transmitting information, ideas and knowledge from a source to a receiver or several audiences through a medium or several media with the possibility of a feedback.

Concerning change (development), Levin (1994) cited in Wilson (2006) says "development is ultimately not about finance but about people, their motivation, aspirations, creativity and values". Wilson (2006) also quotes Leon (1994) as saying change cannot exist without participation while participation cannot take place without communication. This implies that the former is dependent on the latter and vice versa.

These concepts are interdependent and naturally reinforcing. When we speak about change (sustainable), communication cannot be ruled out. The next issue is that of the appropriate channel(s) that may be used to achieve the set goals. These channels could be radio, television, newspapers, magazines, traditional media or the internet. Another important aspect is the feedback. This enables recipients to have a say thus, participating in

the change process. Once this aspect is out, such change programme is bound to fail. This is so because it enables the change agent to ascertain problem areas or progress as the case may be while the recipients also make inputs concerning the change effort. A very good instance of a recent policy of the federal government which made workers to raise eyebrows is the issue of e-payment system. The ministry involved claimed to have educated the labor force about the policy. Just at the onset of its implementation, problems emanated: from wrong filling of forms to improper postings, double bank charges and the most worrisome, delay in the actual payments.

The situation brought untold hardship for workers then as salaries was delayed. The labor force felt that they were only notified and not educated as regards the advantages and disadvantages of the electronic payment system so that they (workers) would make the choice of accepting or backing out. As a result, there was a huge outcry from employees end. But if this policy properly channeled, problems would not have manifested. There are so many policies which have failed due to lack of communication in the planning and implementation processes thereby slowing down the pace of development.

Nigeria actually brought on board measures to market its image both home and abroad especially during the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo and received approval in 2004. The office then was Ministry of Information and National Orientation headed by Chukwuemeka Chikelu while the programme was tagged "Brand Nigeria Project/Nigeria Image Project". The programme was later changed to "Heart of Africa" Project.

Frank Nweke continued from there in 2006 while Dora Akunyili came with 'Re-branding Nigeria Image Project' from 2007 to 2008. Later, Labaran Maku came with the "Good Governance" tour and has held on till



date. Such other pet projects have come and gone which were not properly implemented. The re-branding image project is however ongoing but under different nomenclatures. The aim is to project a positive image of our dear fatherland. The only thing which needs to be done is a change of attitude by Nigerians so that vices like corruption, bribery, money laundering and misappropriation of public funds; indiscipline and the most recent trend of kidnapping which daint our image could be eradicated. If the right strategies are employed including communication at the grassroots and indeed all strata of the society, it will see the light of the day.

Communication has however played significant roles for instance; social-cultural changes have particularly had positive effects on people's perceptions, beliefs, values, and subsequent normative standards. Such elements as bride wealth, witchcraft and superstition, burial rites which were respected very much in traditional African processes are presently facing a lot of challenges. Bride price for example is perceived as one of the exploitative tolls against women especially in terms of their status and educational opportunities. Though still supported in some quarters, awareness on the part of parents either from the traditional institution or discussions among themselves has brought a great change.

From the religious stand too, the Catholic and NKST churches for instance are trying to stamp out extravagant spending on burial rites. This is because at the end of the day such families experience untold hardship. As such, the law is that any member of the church who dies should not be kept in the mortuary for more than ten days and the grave should be made devoid of beautifications. If the law is trampled upon, the deceased stands not to be buried according to Christian rites. This change is gradually coming to stay because people now understand the rationale for enforcement of such norm and the effect of

excess burial spending on their lives. But at the same time, some segments of the christian population frown at this development. Such people feel that they are restricted from according total last respects to their lost ones. This same awareness, courtesy of communication has drastically reduced practices that are inimical to growth such as violence against women, application of fertilizer to the farms, increase in birth rate and other practices relating to health of individuals. Suffice it therefore, to say that communication is pivotal to development.

#### Aspects of Communication/Development

The aspects of development communication are understanding, participation and positive change according to Moemeka (2000).

- a. **Understanding:-** Generally, understanding entails the knowledge that one has about a particular thing or situation. In this case, those to have that knowledge are the target publics for whom the change effort is meant for. Development communication is not directed at persuading those for whom development initiatives have been initiated but at creating understanding. This means that it is interaction oriented. The intention is to create a conducive atmosphere for genuine dialogue that would ensure the benefitting society understands the rationale for the development programmes and what they stand to gain.
- b. **Participation:-** This involves taking part in an activity – the change process. These concepts are interwoven or rather depend on each other. This means that understanding what is on ground later leads to participation – involvement. When that understanding is established, the benefitting social system now accepts



the need for change and fully participates in the planning and execution of the development programmes. This means the development communication is audience – oriented. The emphasis is not so much on getting development agents to reach their goals but rather creating an enabling atmosphere that would bring about understanding, appreciation and active involvement in the development efforts.

- c. **Positive Change:-** This aspect of development is encompassing as it covers all round change: social, economic, religious, behavioral or attitudinal. It is a key concept in development support communication which focuses on society in general with a view to overcoming present malaise and realizing a better future. Positive change can therefore used to mean development. As stated earlier, the three concepts are interdependent as one leads to another. That is to say that understanding boils down to participation and to positive change. Change is said to be positive when people when people's lives have been improved upon in all respects or at least, reasonably.

#### Factors that Facilitate the Change

##### Process

Some of the factors that enhance social change according to Moemeka (2000) are:

- A. **Communication:** This factor or characteristic dwells on the extent to which facts of a social change project are disseminated and discussed. Most times, cultural demands or peoples' way of life generally constrain free and open discussions of certain issues involved in a change programme. In such cases, it is likely that the change would not come about easily. Take sex

education for instance, not everyone likes such discourse especially illiterates and some religious persons. Therefore, imparting change towards that dimension becomes somewhat difficult. But the fact is that, communication is very vital to existence and without it, the world would be a silent zone where things do not move. The change agents themselves compound problems as most often they only dump information rather than talking with those concerned. A very recent issue is that of E-Payment system which came face to face with certain problems. Most workers complained that they were not adequately informed about the change and to worsen the situation, there were so many problems that came with it – erroneous filling of forms which later led to more serious problems, over deductions, delay in payment etc. it is strongly believed that if people are adequately informed about any development, considerable progress will be recorded.

- B. **Simplification:** This is directed at ensuring that there is no complexity involved in understanding the demands of advocated change and in the process of implementing such demands. If the target social system does not understand the change proposal, there is bound to be difficulty in persuading them. The teaching of Mathematics for example to students who have poor background in the subject becomes a herculean task. For the teacher to change that trend, he has to take the students back to the basics in order that the current complex topic can be understood.
- C. **Trialability:** This factor can be likened to a pre-test or pilot study. It is the extent to which an advocated



change programme can be subjected to trial efforts or implemented in manageable bits. To some extent, only agriculturists go by this. Whenever they want to introduce new or improved varieties, they first of all try it on a small piece of land and the result determines whether to go ahead and introduce it to farmers or not. Trialability is said to be capable of removing fear of uncertainty or failure.

- D. **Compatibility:** This is the consistency between advocated new order of things and the needs and aspirations of the target social system. Here, emphasis is on needs, even though wants are also important. The problem is that people do not know how to differentiate between needs and wants. That is, those that are more imperative or rather glaring at the moment. The recent introduction of crash helmets for motorists met with stiff resistance. Up till now, not so many of the motorists have complied with this directive irrespective of the fact that it is meant for their very safety while on the road and in the case of a crash. They feel it is not necessary and besides, they own their lives so government should not bother.

The fact remains that these factors are there but most times, the right people are not saddled with the responsibility of executing change programmes and even when that is done, these realities are not put to use in order to succeed. That is perhaps why we will continue to have problems with developmental progress. By the time the right course is charted, we will begin to experience the kind of change we need.

#### **Variables that Impede Change Efforts**

Positive change is to the effect that better

conditions of living and of human relationships are enabled. But this goal is one of the most difficult tasks to achieve. Moemeka (2000) outline some factors which tend to work against the introduction of new ideas as follows:

- A. **Cultural/Religious Barriers:** These are obstacles brought to the surface as a result of lack of the correspondence or symmetry or rather relevance between the culture/religion of the target social system and the demands of an advocated change. For example, rejection of family planning for child spacing especially by certain churches and parents especially the not too learned. As for most church doctrines, it is sinful to embark on it. They believe that people are supposed to procreate so going on family planning is a sin against God. So many cultural practices stand in the way of change. In some cases, marriage to certain tribes is a taboo. Some even go to the extent of rejecting orthodox medicine for traditional cure. Even when they are shown the light, they refuse to change.

- B. **Social Barriers:** Group norms, group solidarity, fear of isolation and group conflicts are all examples of social barriers that frequently cause resistance to change. Ordinarily, these are positive elements of human inter-relationships for any society but they often become hurdles if new ideas and change efforts are perceived as threatening their existence or their acceptance in Nigeria e.g. Labor Congress and other bodies resisting increase in fuel pump prices.

- C. **Organizational Barriers:** The author uses organization here to mean the structure and not an institution. That is, how the operational structure of an organization creates barriers to change in that organization. When new ideas or shifts from the status-quo are planned,



administrative arrangements, however, do create problems. This is usually because change or innovation may be seen as a threat to those whose powers or influence would be adversely affected.

- D. Psychological Barriers:** These are barriers to social change and development on the part of the individual. These barriers are created by, among others, lack of awareness (selective perception), the need for homeostasis, professional orientation and low empathy. Equally important is the fall-out from ethno-centrism and cultural pride, individual pride, arrogance and unwillingness to acknowledge other's superior quality knowledge and suggestions and to limit one's own limited abilities. The issue here is that once one is not aware of the existence of a problem due to all or any of the above traits, he or she cannot support the change effort introduced. All these forms of resistance to change which Moemeka (2000) asserts are not necessarily destructive. He says, resistance is a healthy phenomenon as it acts as a smoke detector, that is, drawing attention to issues and problems that would otherwise escape early and cause greater problems in the later stages of implementation of a development or social change project. Invariably, these obstacles have both positive and negative effects. The latter stand in the way of progress while, the former help to vent the attendant problems early enough for the desired change to take place.

#### The Way Forward

Change is a vital and constant phenomenon. Therefore, when resistance is in its way, a well-planned and executed development communication effort geared towards re-

education and carried out within the target social system on a dialogical basis can suffice. The change preventing factors mentioned may be what people want but these factors could certainly not be what they or their social system need. A communication strategy that imaginatively uses existing knowledge to carefully explain the difference and subtly show how the pursuit of wants is less fundamentally beneficial than the pursuit of needs would go a long way in winning the people over. Moemeka (2000) states further that: First, you must have been a familiar face and second, you must go near enough to make the help possible. You must know the target social system well enough to be able to circumvent those inhibiting socio-cultural factors. When understanding is built and participation created, positive change is enabled.

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