**Meeting the Challenges of Sustainable Development through Communication**

**By**

**Christopher I. Ochonogor PhD  
Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies  
University of Port Harcourt**[**christopher.ochonogor@uniport.edu.ng**](mailto:christopher.ochonogor@uniport.edu.ng)

**Abstract**  
Since the attainment of independence in 1960 by Nigeria, the country as with other developing nations in Africa and Asia has been in a race to achieve sustainable national development. This race seems not won because in spite of the decades of rolling out development plans, the country is still struggling with meeting the basic development needs of the populace. Communication has been identified as a prime mover in the realisation of development objectives. This paper, a library investigation, attempts to explicate how the challenges of sustainable development can be overcome through a robust Communication paradigm that would make the citizenry to latch on to and own any development initiatives. The paper rests on the democratic participant media theory which emphasises communality in information sharing rather than the centralised, top-down government initiated communication. It concludes that sustainable development is achievable if the people become active participants in communication and information management which give individuals a sense of belonging and self-worth. The paper recommends, among others, that development facilitators should evolve a communication mechanism that encourages collective decision making possible for the attainment of sustainable national development.

**Key Words:** Challenges, Communication media, sustainable development, information sharing,

**Introduction**

Developing countries to which Nigeria is part of, are engrossed with a myriad of development issues. With many years of experimentations with different types of government─ military, monarchical and democracy─ these countries are still to come to terms with the development strategy that would yield the best for the greater good of their citizens. After many years and phases of rolling and development planning in Nigeria, which can be classified under three eras: The era of Fixed- Term Planning (1962-85), the Era of Rolling Plan (1990-1998), and the New Democratic Dispensation (1999 till date). Uche, (2019) explained that:

Nigeria had explored four 5-year development plans, one structural adjustment programme, two 3-year rolling plans, four visions and strategies including the recently launched Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) There seem to be an endless search for the best strategy for her developmental purposes as the country is still wandering around and manipulating all sorts of developmental initiatives. It is utterly disappointing that all the various planning initiatives the country had adopted had not delivered the much-expected results; rather, the country is still battling with mounting developmental challenges (P.27).

The failure of the development plans to achieve their objectives has denied the country the much-desired development which would have impacted on the social and economic development of the people to bring about improvement in the standard of living and raise life expectancy. Nigeria is in dire need of development in every realm of life─ Economy, education, health, agriculture, transportation, science and technology and even politics─. The country has been tinkered with several development ideas, policies and programmes and enormous resources committed into them without the commensurate result of getting out of the poverty pedestal. Many citizens have been further thrown into harsher economic conditions. Life expectancy plummeted and the country won the unenviable title of the poverty capital of the world. Given the vast human and natural resources she is endowed with, Nigeria is supposed to be among the ten most developed countries of the world if the resources have been properly harnessed.

It was with the intension of finding solutions to the development needs for the less developed countries to which Nigeria regrettably belongs that the United Nations developed the Millennium Development Goals MDGs which was implemented by member countries between 2000 and 2015. At the expiration of the stipulated life span of the MDGs, it was expanded and rebranded as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the 'Global Goals' to accelerate development to lead to a better life for all humanity by the year 2030. The SDGs has 17 goals and 169 targets. Each target has between 1 and 3 indicators used to measure progress toward reaching the target. The 17 goals include:

No poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being for people, quality education,

gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation, and infrastructure, reducing inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and reproduction, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions and partnership for the goals(Blanc, 2015; Klapper, El-zoghbi and Hess 2016).

SDGs are interconnected and designed to be more inclusive and sustainable so as to attain international development in all nations of the world. With the adoption of the SDGs, heads of governments of different nations were supposed to domesticate these goals by developing blueprints to attain the desired goals. All the 17 goals encapsulated in the SDGs are applicable to Nigeria. Many of these development projects embarked upon by Nigeria have not been successful, perhaps, due to the fact that the target populations were not well sensitised on the benefits that would accrue to them from participating in those projects. Many of these projects were seen as elitist, meant only for the elite and urban dwellers. It is a truism that the adoption of new ideas is necessary for the progress and development of any society. However, people are wont to resist change or are slow in adopting innovations when new ideas fail to conform to their cultural beliefs and practices. Resistance to change in most cases are the result of the lack of or non-provision of adequate information that would make people make informed decisions on whether to accept or participate. Development has been described as an evolving process that improves the quality of life of and living conditions of the people through the introduction of positive change, spiritual, material and infrastructural transformation (Bassey, 2019). Walter Rodney (1972) believes that societies, whether modern or primitive, are seen as developed if they can creatively harness the object of nature to advance their living conditions on a sustainable basis. As he puts it:

Development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. A society develops economically as its members increase jointly their capacity for dealing with the environment. It is also dependent on how they put the laws (science) of nature or the extent to which they put the understanding into practice by devising tools (technology), and on the manner in which work is organised. Taking a long-term view, it can be said that there has been constant economic development within human society since the origin of man because man has multiplied enormously his capacity to win a living from nature Walter Rodney (1972).

Economists consider development in terms of economic growth which is measured by the Gross National Product (GNP) as the central indicator of development. GDP tracks the health of the economy. Thus economic development occurs when the GDP increases or when the income per capita rises. However, an economy is considered to be in recession if the GDP stagnates. Economists and investors watch the GDP because it represents the total dollar value of goods and services produced by an economy. Another way economists measure development is through the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI) and the Human Development Index (HDI). While PQLI uses three indicators of infant mortality, life expectancy at age one and basic literacy at age 15, the HDI focuses on three social factors: life expectancy, adult literacy and years of schooling. The cores of both indices are good health, a decent living standard and knowledge obtained through education.

However, it has been argued that development is more than the establishment of industries and production lines that is measured by GDP but is person-centred. The argument here, is that if it is meant to foster the well-being of individuals within a society or country, then there should be the provision of a favourable environment for the people to realise their full potential and achieve self-fulfilment. Until this is done, development would be a mirage. Thus Odozi (2002) said:

Where there is undue emphasis on physical investment to the neglect of human…capital, growth becomes either stunted or unsustainable. It is, therefore, important to stress that human and natural capitals are critical not only as factors of production but also as determinants of social welfare. Human capital, as proxied (sic) by formal education, tends to boost economic growth in a market-based environment which promotes innovation. In this connection, it has been demonstrated that popular education facilitates technological diffusion and productivity growth.

The above assertion underscores the relevance of information and communication flow in the acceptance and participation of the masses in a development initiative for success to be attained. It is in recognition of the imperative of information dissemination for the acceptance of any new idea, that governments at both the state and federal levels established Ministries of Information to serve as their mouthpieces in spreading information about their development plans and policies. The Federal Government of Nigeria, out of the concern for the citizens to tag along in the various development efforts, went a step further by establishing at various times, special agencies to assist in the propagation of information about its policies and programmes. In 1987, the military government of the self-styled president, General Ibrahim Babangida established the Mass Mobilisation for Self-reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) later rechristened, National Orientation Agency (NOA) in 1993 and saddled with the task of communicating government policy, staying abreast of public opinion and promoting patriotism and national unity and development of the Nigerian society.

Indeed, communication is important to enable ideas to be transformed into informed actions. This means that the people must, first of all, understand the need for the development and the benefits that would accrue to them before they can participate. Moemeka (2000) has insisted that “Helping a people to understand and accept the rationale for changing existing conditions that are considered no longer conducive to their well-being requires the full and active involvement of the people in the planning and execution of the advocated.” This can only happen if the people have enough information which is the outcome of an effective communication mechanism. The application of communication in a development initiative implies the deployment of both the personal and impersonal media─ interpersonal interactions, group, folk and the mass media─ in fostering understanding of development programmes and policies to engender participation. The mass media are generally regarded as purveyors of new idea and behaviour and serve as agents of change and modernisation. They possess powers that can be used to mould the minds of the people and influence their decisions in private and public life. They have the capacity to make or mar the development process (Sawant 2000, p. 31).

**Theoretical Underpinning**

The Democratic Participant Theory developed by Denis McQuail is hinged on the need for horizontal, rather than vertical communication in the society since the top-down form of communication seem to alienate the masses, the targets of development-oriented communication from the continuum. The tenet of the democratic participant theory is that every citizen has the right to access and be served by the mass media according to their needs. This theory emerged out of the criticism that the private media pay more attention to commercial goals at the expense of development-related issues and that publicly-owned media are more or less mere megaphones of any government in power. In essence, the theory advocates that the media should be available and should serve the interest of the masses rather than that of the elite and government.

The basic principles of the Democratic Participant Media Theory are that:

1. Individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to the media (right to communicate) and rights to be served by media according to their own determination of need.
2. The organisation and content of media should not be subject to centralised political or state bureaucratic control.
3. Groups, organisations and local communities should have their own media.
4. Small scale, interactive and participative media are better than large scale, one-way professional media.
5. Certain social needs relating to the mass media are not adequately expressed through individual consumer demands or through the state and its major institutions.
6. Communication is too important to be left to professionals alone.

Apparently, the democratic participant media theory came as a result of the reaction against commercialisation and monopolisation of the media by private investors on the one hand, and the centralisation and bureaucratisation of publicly owned media on the other. The seeming situational appropriateness of this theory to contemporary discourse in development communication planning resulted in a void and lack of duly representative framework.

The only way out, it seems, is that development messages are supposed to be rooted in what the target audience considered to be important. It is in view of the foregoing that Wilson (2005), citing Adesonya, (1990), asserts that since the media is a product for human beings and human societies, they should be readily available to the relevant population. He stresses the need for a communication system that is pressed to the service of all and sundry. One that is more socially responsive in which all people are involved and have a stake as subjects.

The theory so far that recognises audience role in the ideation, initiation and implementation of development plans is the Democratic Participant Media Theory which sees the people as decision makers capable of conscious choice on what they want and how best to pursue such interests. This theory is particularly useful in development news reportage because it gives credence to grass roots participation. The theory also elaborates the importance of rural populace who form the majority of people in developing countries and who are more in need of development programmes planning and implementation. (Agbo, Ojobor, &Ezinwa 2008).

**Theory of Reasoned Action**

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) although developed in 1975 by Fishbein and Ajzen, was first introduced in 1985 by IcekAjzen and is applied to various human behavioural situations and to explain human behaviour on the basis of his intention as precursors to actual behaviour. The Theory of Reasoned Action assumes that individuals behave in a rational manner in order to achieve favourable results and to avoid disappointing others by confounding their expectations. According to this theory, people's intention to behave in a certain manner is a predecessor variable of their actual behaviour. Moreover, the intention of the individual to behave in a certain way is determined by the attitude toward that behaviour and by the subjective norms. (Hale, Householder and Greene, 2013). Researchers have found attitudes as a significant predictor of behavioural intentions. In the context of compliance with the stipulated guideline or behavioural expectations for the success of a development project, a positive attitude towards a new idea predisposes the people to comply.

Information gleaned from communication processes, somewhat modifies peoples attitude and predisposes them to have behavioural intentions that may induce compliance. Studies have established that attitude change through internalisation is consistent with collaborative communication that is a shared initiative and an open system of information sharing based on inter-group and interpersonal trust. The implementation of a communication strategy that combined interactive group and interpersonal sources on the ground with mass media initiative has, over the years, successfully tackled many social and health problems. Terming this 'strategic communication,' McKee, Bertrand and Becker-Benton (2004) claimed that the strategy has succeeded in the campaign for seatbelt use and lowering serum cholesterol in America in the late 1990s and can be very effective in enhancing development.

**Development Communication Challenges**

Communication is at the heart of development. It is through communication that the poor and the excluded people can give voice to their aspirations and begin to play a leading role in solving their problem to bring about development. Communication can enable poor people to move from being passive recipients of externally generated development interventions to being advocates and initiators of development for the enrichment of their lives. When people are wholly engaged in their own economic and social development, progress towards attaining good health, achieving food security, building working communities and preserving traditions is more sustainable.

Since the 1960s, Nigeria has had an admixture of successful and failed development programmes and campaigns implemented at different times of her national life. Some of the successful ones like the change in drive from right to left hand of 1972, the change in currency from Pound and shillings to Naira and Kobo, 1973 and the metrification 1975. The successes of these changes were attributed to a combination of communication and the prescribed punishment for those who did not comply. For instance, anyone who used the old currency after the deadline for the change was liable to prosecution and imprisonment if convicted. And for the change in drive, anyone who drove on the left side of the road risked imprisonment, permanent disability or death when involved in an accident due to recalcitrance.

The failures of programmes and campaigns like the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution, the War Against Indiscipline (WAI), Directorate of Food Road and Rural Infrastructure (DIFFRI), National Land Agricultural Development Agency (NALDA), the Tree Planting Campaigns, Better Life for Rural Women and the current war against corruption were not because the mass media were not employed. The reason was that there were no deliberate policies to enlighten the populace through appropriate communication paradigms to convince and persuade them to accept and participate in the programmes. A consideration of some of the challenges to the effective use of communication to induce attitude change and participation shall be done hereunder:

**Over Reliance on the Mass media**

A seeming challenge to the attainment sustainable development in Nigeria may be partly due to the fact that development facilitators rely heavily on the modern media of radio, television, newspaper and magazine to propagate information about the ideas. The use of these media alone in disseminating the ideals of development programmes negate the principles enshrined in the democratic participant media theory as the modern media are centralised, in the control of the government, urban-based and to a substantial extent profit-driven. The erroneous assumption by promoters of development initiatives that the conventional media can reach every citizen to induce compliance with messages has frustrated the attainment of the development goals. It is said that an individual may receive some exposure from the news media but learn of and adopt his modern attitude solely through interpersonal sources of information.

Although the mass media have been credited with the powers to create awareness about new ideas and inculcate new beliefs, they are, however, not very effective in changing old beliefs and attitude. At the point where decisions are made to accept or reject an innovation, the maze of interpersonal communication channels can be very effective in inducing attitude change which has a likelihood of influencing behaviour that accounts for the acceptance of a novelty.

**The Ad-hoc Approach to Development Communication**

There is the need to sustain campaigns intended for attitude change over a considerable length of time to enable the target audience to see the idea as important. Rimon (2003) said that the mass media that have been very effective in the commercial sector campaigns have not been successful in behaviour change campaigns because of lack of persistence. For instance, he said, if Coca-Cola does not advertise in the next three years, it may be likely out of the market by then.” He argued that the most effective communication programmes worldwide are those that employed proven concepts from the private commercial sector and applied them to the public social sector. Many governments initiated development projects have achieved little or no result because of the short nature of the communication campaign. For instance, we do know that Nigeria will be undergoing a general election in 2023. However, there are no communicative efforts by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) at sensitising the electorate, about the continuous voter registration, especially for those who have not registered or collected their permanent voters’ card. Maybe, few months to the election, the nation would witness a media frenzy by the electoral body and the people will be inundated with a barrage of information about the timelines for registration and collection of the card. These are communication inadequacies that disenfranchise many electorates that lead to voter apathy and electoral malfeasance.

**Paternal Attitude of Government**

Many development projects fail because initiators, particularly governments think that they know what the people want and go ahead to implement programmes and provide amenities that are of no use to the people. Governments behave like parents who think for their children and know what is best for them and so, do not involve the children in the planning of what to eat, wear, go and whom to associate with. Parents also try to choose the career path of the children, which in many cases fail to meet the needs and aspirations and pit the parents against the parents. There have been several projects executed in parts of Nigeria that have been rejected by the people because those project did not meet the most pressing needs of the target population.

**Non Involvement of the Target Population in programmes**

As a consequence of the paternal stance of governments, the people for whom programmes or project are meant for are not consulted in all the stages of the programme. From ideation to evaluation, their inputs are not sought, and they are never involved in the implementation of the projects. This denies the people the sense of belonging and consequently, provokes a sense absentee ownership which leads to apathy and lack of care for the project. A few years ago, the government of Rivers State built a model secondary school for a community in the state; however, due to the absence of consultation with the people and their involvement in the entire process, they rejected the site for the project. Consequently, the facility was not utilised.

**Lack of Sincerity of Government:** The many years of deceit and insincerity by the different tiers of government buoyed by the endemic corruption in the country have contributed to enthrone a belief among the people that government was never sincere in pursuing development programmes and projects to their logical ends. They have lost faith in governments abilities to demonstrate integrity in doing what they promised to do. So governments' communications about development programme are seen as propaganda gimmicks to bolster their images and to scurry peoples favour.

**Use of Compulsion Rather than Persuasion**

A major hindrance to the sustainability of development programmes in Nigeria is the compulsive elements built into the communication efforts of the campaigns. Human beings are rational and have free will. So, they desire to be convinced of the need for them to partake in any activity. People are ready to resist any activity that tries to impose restrictions on them and readily embrace ones that give them the free will to decide whether to be part of it. For instance, the monthly environmental sanitation exercises declared on the last Saturday of every month in many states in Nigeria have not yielded the desired goal because they have not been persuaded enough to appreciate the importance of the action. People are compelled to stay at home and partake in the clean up through the announcement of restriction of movement for the duration of the exercise. The outcome negates the energy dissipated as many use the period for meetings while many youths engage in sports rather than clean their environment.

**The Way Forward**

**1. Make Communication an integral part of the project**

For the sustainability of any development project, there is the need to consider communication as central to the success of the campaign. The communication component of a development campaign should not be an afterthought, just conceived to fulfil all righteousness of informing the people about a project. There should be a deliberate effort to clearly define the role of communication from the inception through execution to evaluation to give the target population an opportunity to understand the relevance of the programme to their lives and take informed decision to participate.

**2.Adopt the right communication strategy**

To overwhelm resistance to change, scholars suggested that mass-media messages should be reinforced with interpersonal forms of communication in use over the years. This is important because societies hold on to certain beliefs that are dear to them. For the people’s belief system to be changed, their total belief system would have to be overturned. This means debunking beliefs and providing alternatives. interpersonal communication should be encouraged in the to engender the feeling of national integration, especially among the aged and less educated.

For a change of attitude and adoption of innovation to be achieved, the target audience should be encouraged to engage in interpersonal communication to reinforce mass-media messages. Scholars say that the role of mass communication in facilitating development is often indirect and only contributory rather than direct and powerful. Research has shown that, while groups can obtain information from media sources like radio and television, this information has relatively little effect on behaviour change. Since face-to-face communication is the most efficient mode of communication in a country where the majority is either illiterate or semi-literate, it should be properly organised and exploited to ensure that development-oriented messages get to the rural dwellers to elicit feedback, engender understanding and encourage participation.

3.Sustainability of communication

Obviously, the day-to-day repetition of information in the news media over a period of time produces noticeable effects on attitudes. Scholars agreed that development communication should be structure gradually over a period of time to highlight the importance of a particular campaign and to ensure public participation. Although opinions are divided on the exact duration for attitude change campaigns, Stone and McCombs in 1981were of the view that since there is definitely a time lag in the movement of issue salience from the media to the public agenda, “an approximate two-to-six-months period should be given for the translation of the mass media agenda to the public agenda.” However, given the African literacy level and access to the mass media, it may be permissible to suggest that six-to-ten-months periods should be adequate to turn public attention to an issue in the mass media.

4. Orange Communication Model: On the other hand, experts advocate a change in the communication model from apple to orange to ensure the success of an attitude change campaign. The apple model, according to Rimon (2003), reflects a polished one-directional communication strategy flowing from the top to bottom. The orange model reflects a lot of little dots representing governmental agencies, different stakeholders and community-based groups all banding together to form a more integrated communication programme for behaviour change. It is believed that communication for attitude change should increasingly emphasise dialogue between couples and partners, parents and children, neighbours and friends. In the light of this, Rimon (2003) said that Scientific research and commonsense have it that when people talk to each other behaviour change can be achieved. There is the need to look more intensely into the dynamics of these interactions in relation to development campaigns to achieve the desired goals. Many individuals have a large network of relationships to which they maintain communication with. These networks of friends, relations and colleagues provide the reinforcements that help to crystalise media information, clear doubts and misconception and nudgepeopleto drop certain beliefs and attitudes that impede the acceptance of new ideas.

Conclusion

It is a truism that sustainable development is not possible in any aspect of national life without an adequate and planned use of communication in the entire process. Researches and indeed, experience have shown that even in households, communication is essential for peaceful coexistence and progress. The same holds true for national development if all and sundry must participate to ensure success. Sustainable development can only happen if the development facilitators, in this case, governments show capacity in the use of all media forms, especially the type that combines the powers and reach of the mass media and the convincing network of interpersonal or folk media. Although the country has experimented different communication paradigm to achieve quick but elusive development, all hopes are not lost, there should be a reappraisal of the communication machinery of government and other development agents to evolve a more realistic way of galvanising public positive opinion around development projects.

**References**

Agbo, B., Ojobor, I. &Ezinwa, (2008). Issues in development communication. Enugu: John Jacob’s Classic Publishers Ltd

Bassey, B. E. (2019). The concept of development media theory and the burden of objectivity in journalism practice. In Udoudo, A. J, Bashir, A. S. & Batta, H. E. Development communication in contemporary Nigeria. A festschrift of Professor ClifordAshongAshong. Port Harcourt: Competence Digital Prints, pp. 24-39

Hale, J. L., Householder, B.J. & Greene, K. L. (2013). The theory of reasoned action, The persuasion handbook: Developments in theory and practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 259-289.

Klapper, L,, El-zoghbi,M. & Hess, H. (2016). Achieving the development goal: The role of financial inclusion. United Nations Secretary General’s Special Advocate for Inclusive finance and development. Retrieved August 22, 2020, www.cgap.org

Le Blanc, D. (2015). Towards integration at last?The sustainable development goal as a network of target.Desa working paper no. 141 ST/ESA/2015/DWP/141

Moemeka, Andrew. (2000). Development communication in action: Building understanding and creating participation. Blue Ridge Summit, PA 17214-0191: The Rowman& Littlefield Publishing Group (formerly known as University Press of America),

Odozi, V. A. (2002). The imperative of economic growth in Nigeria.In *The Nigerian Banker.* January-June 2002.

Rimon, J. J. (2003). HIV/AIDS and behaviour change communication. The Communication Initiative. British Columbia, Canada.

Sawant, P. (2000). Media and democracy: a global view. In mass media and democracy. Abuja: Nigerian Press council. Sterling- Horden Publishers (Nig) Ltd.

Uche, E. (2019). Development Plans and Policies in Nigeria: Observed Impediments and Practical Best Alternatives. International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation (IJRSI) 6 (7)

Wilson, D. (2005). New perspectives in applied communication. Ibadan: