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Formulating Comprehensive National Communication Policy for Development in African Countries: A Framework

by S.T. Kwame Boafo

Abstract

This article deals with the issue of communication policy-making as a strategy for development in Sub-Saharan African countries. The author contends that the impact of communication systems and strategies on development efforts in Africa would only be minimal until African policy-makers and planners undertake more serious efforts to incorporate communication strategies and information utilization in overall national development policies and programmes. The article discusses the significance of communication policies in national development, critically analyses current approaches to communication policy-making in African countries and suggests an outline for a comprehensive approach to national communication policies in Africa.

Re'sume'

Cet article traite de la question l'utilisation d'une politique de la communication comme stratégie de développement en Afrique sub-saharienne. L'auteur affirme que l'impact des systèmes et des stratégies de communication sur les efforts de développement send très faible jusqu'au moment ou les décideurs et les planificateurs africains prendront des efforts sérieux en vue d'incorporer les stratégies de communication et l'utilisation de l'information dans l'ensemble des politique et programmes de développement.

L'article remet en cause l'importance des politiques nationales de communication pour le développement; analyse de manière critique les approches actuelles en matière de politique de la communication dans les pays africain, puis suggère une approche globale pour l'élaboration des politiques nationales de communication en Afrique.

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Introduction:

The international communication scene during the 1950's and the 1960's was characterized by euphoria over the functions and impact of communication systems and resources in developing the newly emerging nations of the Third World. Communication was expected to play a significant role in bringing about a rapid transformation of the nations in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world which achieved their political independence after the Second World War. Communication media and resources were seen as tools for social change and it was anticipated that development and "modernization" in the "backward" societies of the South would be concomitant with transfer and utilization of communication and other technologies from the North and with diffusion of innovation and messages through available communication systems. Communication was, indeed, assumed to be "the key that opens the door to change".¹

The decades of the 1970's and early 1980's have witnessed a gradual dissipation of much of the euphoria which marked early conceptualizations about communication and social change. Numerous "mass media and modernization" studies conducted in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa yielded empirical evidence which indicated that message transfer (or innovation-diffusion) by itself could not adequately effect development. Genuine development in most Third World societies would require fundamental changes in the political, economic and social structures both at the international and national levels.² Communication resources *per se* would have only a minimal impact on development efforts in Africa and elsewhere, if development facilitators and resources do not accompany information provision and if communication systems and facilities are not well integrated into overall national development policies, plans and goals.

This paper discusses the issue of communication policy-making as a strategy for development in Sub-Saharan countries. It presents a definitional analysis and rationale and examines current approaches to communication policy in African countries, south of the Sahara, then suggests a framework for comprehensive national communication policy in these countries.

Communication Policy: Definitional Analysis and Rationale:

Since the early 1970's it has been increasingly recognized by communication scholars, communication practitioners and policy-makers

alike that the challenges and complex problems which society faces from communication technologies need to be handled coherently and systematically through policy-making and planning. The growing recognition of the need for and crucial significance of communication policies in planning for development is partly reflected in the steadily accumulating work on the issue in international communication literature. This subject has attracted the attention of many scholars of communication systems, especially of communication systems in Third World societies.³

Also reflective of the growing recognition of the importance of communication policy is the organization of international discussions and workshops on national communication policies and of regional inter-governmental conferences on communication policies under the auspices of UNESCO and other international agencies. Such conferences have been organized in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.⁴

A common element links most of the writings, discussions and workshops: that as much as other sectors of a country's life can be subjected to extensively deliberated policy formulation and implementation to guide development, so also can communication resources, activities and technologies of a nation be amenable to systematic policies and careful planning.

Communication policies have been defined as a set of "principles and norms established to guide the behaviour of communication systems. Their orientation is fundamental and long-range, although they have implications of short-range significance. They are shaped in the context of society's general approach to communication."⁵ A national communication policy enunciates the goals, objectives and functions of communication systems and aims at dovetailing these with the overall socio-economic, political and cultural development goals of the society. It is carried out within the national environment and shaped by the socio-economic, cultural and political climate of the society. Alan Hancock has observed that a national communication policy determines the context and objective of communication planning; planning articulates and embodies policies.⁶

In essence, the principal purpose of a national communication policy is to provide a favourable framework within which communication systems and technologies can be developed and utilized in a coordinated, consistent and systematic manner for the benefit of society. It provides a way of preparing society to deal effectively and systematically with the complex problems and issues generated by developments in

communication technology at both the national and the international levels. A UNESCO-sponsored meeting of experts on communication policies and planning in 1972 noted:

To master the impact of modern communication technology, to make the fullest use of the potential of communication for the benefit of society and the satisfaction of personal needs, to give a wide scope to the creative expression of the human mind, that is the challenge which can only be met through deliberate communication policies and through careful communication planning.⁷

Noreene Janus observed that "a comprehensive national policy that integrates and rationalizes the various communication activities is essential if the nation is to deal successfully with their development problems and confront the monopoly control over information exercised at the international level by the industrialized countries."⁸ Such a coordinated and comprehensive handling mechanism enables a nation to develop and strengthen its own communication systems and to safeguard its indigenous cultures against the constant intrusion, through information channels, of undesirable alien cultural values and traits. Altaf Gauhar seems to agree with this point when he remarks that a "weak and suppressed information system invites foreign cultural infiltration."⁹

A clearly articulated and well-defined communication policy also offers a rational basis for planning the development of communication infrastructure as well as for an equitable and efficient utilization of existing communication resources and facilities to meet a nation's development goals. Participants in the Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Africa held in Yaounde, Cameroon, in July 1980, underlined the need for communication policies in national development and recommended that each African country formulate and implement a national communication policy. As the conference report puts it, "in the absence of an overall communication policy, the various sectors and activities of communication in Africa are seldom coordinated and often at variance with national development goals."¹⁰ The Yaounde conference suggested a number of guidelines for communication policy formulation and planning in African countries. These include:¹¹

1. Communication needs to be recognized as essential to economic, social, education and cultural development.
2. Such recognition would entitle communication to its rightful place in overall national development plans alongside other vital sectors of many important ways while being a developmental sector in its own right.

3. Communication's ultimate goal should be seen as the betterment of man, not only as an economic and social unit, but as a cultural entity and with the potential for contributing in many ways to the enrichment of the community of which he is a part. To reach that potential, he needs to be informed and educated and given opportunity to participate fully in socio-cultural activities, including communication itself.
4. Such participation would only be possible if he is provided with the necessary facilities such as access to communication media, the right to self-expression and the right to make his opinions known.

A 1972 meeting on communication policies and planning observed that a comprehensive and holistic view of the many diverse components of a nation's communication system and activities and a projection into "the future against the needs of society and the individual, are worth the effort, vital and urgent."¹²

Current Approaches to Communication Policy in Africa:

No African country has, to date, evolved or implemented a comprehensive, integrated and holistic communication policy. The general approach to communication policy in Africa has been partial and based on component-by-component consideration. Different kinds of explicit and implicit communication policies have been drawn up or verbally pronounced to govern and regulate the operations and "behaviour" of various communication components in such countries as Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zaire and others.¹³

Each African country, South of the Sahara, has separate sets of regulations and guidelines on the print media, the electronic media, film, news agency, telecommunications, communication training and government information. Communication policies in African countries are often embodied in speeches of national leaders, government official pronouncements and directives, decrees, legislation, and in some instances enshrined in national constitutions. Existing policies relate, *inter alia*, to the perceived functions of communication systems in the society, "press freedom responsibilities," telecommunication services, the management of the predominantly state-owned national mass media (especially radio and television stations) and to the importation and distribution of communication materials, books and films.

A critical analysis of existing policies on communication systems in African countries indicates a number of disquieting elements. First, many

of the policies made through official directives, legislations, decrees or through pronouncements of national leaders do not seem to have been based on any comprehensive research and analysis of communication systems in the countries. No systematically gathered data on the implications, possible manifest and latent long-term impact of communication policies on the social fabric or on development of communication systems underlie much of the policy-making process in many of these countries. Very often communication policies and regulations seem to have been hurriedly drawn up or announced as a reaction to some events or response to one problem or another generated by a particular use of communication technology in the society. The general approach to communication policies and regulations in Africa is piecemeal, compartmentalized and sometimes conflicting with professed goals of society.

Secondly, many communication policies in the region do not seem to have emanated or resulted from extensive deliberations and broad consultation with individuals and agencies expected to implement the policies, or who, in one way or the other, may be affected by the policies. There is high centralization and concentration of communication policy and regulation-making capacity among a few government officials and national leaders. Participation of individuals and institutions in discussions over what kinds of policies to draw up or how the policies should be implemented in each African country is often minor and superficial.

Thirdly, very often, the professed general policies in African countries of harnessing available communication systems, especially the mass media, for national socio-economic, cultural and political development have, in reality, been translated into using available communication facilities to project the image, policies, ideology and programmes of the government of the day. Simultaneously, attempts are made to suppress criticisms of government policies and programmes and expression of diverse views and opinions on national issues. There are numerous instances when communication facilities, power and channels in most African countries have been consciously utilized by the ruling elite, in the words of Twumasi, "as instruments for building personality cults, an enterprise which does not necessarily promote development."¹⁴

Moreover, although in their speeches and pronouncements national leaders and government officials in Africa make reference to the significance of communication systems in the nation's development, little efforts have been made by political leaders and planners of national development programmes to incorporate communication strategies and processes into national development planning. Most 10-year or 5-year

development plans in African countries give only minimal or no attention to communication systems. Information utilization is yet to be recognized as a priority area in development planning. Among national policy and decision makers there seems to be low awareness of the need for a comprehensive policy to incorporate communication processes and strategies and utilization of information in planning for development.¹⁵

Communication and telecommunications systems in most African countries largely serve the needs of the 25 per cent of the people who live in the urban centres while neglecting those of 75 per cent who live in the rural areas. Africa's communication and telecommunications infrastructure is predominantly marked by high centralization and concentration in the few urbanized areas, inadequate communication facilities and resources and limited accessibility to available facilities for most people living in the rural areas. On the whole, modern communication technology in African countries provides service mainly to the rich - the political, administrative, military and business elite and to multinational corporations and their local affiliates.

These dominant characteristics of the communication and telecommunications infrastructure, coupled with the essentially synchronic communication patterns and processes in African societies, hinder the effective participation of the population in discussing and making decisions on significant national issues. The gaps and disparities in the distribution of communication facilities and systems are detrimental for national development since they could create, among people cut off from the mainstream of information flow, severe disagreement or ignorance of national development objectives and strategies. Such conditions can frustrate or retard development efforts in the continent.¹⁶ Yet policies have not been systematically evolved or consistently implemented in most African countries to develop communication and telecommunication facilities in the rural areas or to decentralize and transform the existing system into one which will better serve the entire population.

Further, oral and traditional communication methods such as interpersonal networks, drama or folk theatres, drums, games, linguists and towncriers predominantly feature in the communication environment of African rural communities.¹⁷ The bulk of the population living in rural areas depend extensively on those traditional media rather than on modern technologies for information transmission and reception. Nevertheless, hardly any policies have been devised in any African country to systematically integrate the traditional with the modern communication and telecommunications systems or to consciously use

and encourage sustained utilization of the widespread traditional communication media for Africa's development.

National Communication Policy: A Comprehensive Approach:

Thus far, this paper has presented a definitional analysis of and a rationale for a national communication policy in Sub-Saharan African countries. It has also examined current approaches to communication policies in countries in the region and discussed several factors which vitiate those policies and limit their adequacy for national development. We will now discuss an approach for formulating a more comprehensive, coordinated and coherent national communication policy in African countries.

A strategy for formulating and implementing a national communication policy in each African country requires, first, the establishment of a communication policy-making structure. This structure may be composed of an overall body, such as a national council on communication policy, under which may be several committees or sub-committees which will deal with different aspects of the policy. Membership of the policy-making structure should be inter-ministerial, inter-sectoral, broadly-based and representative of all sections of the society.

A national communication policy council would undertake all the steps required for formulating and implementing a national communication policy which will be compatible with the socio-economic and political context of the country and respond to its development needs. The council would undertake broad consultations on the policy to be formulated, commission policy research and analysis, identify policy issues and suggest policy measures as well as monitor the implementation of the policy. Other functions of the council would be:

- (a) To sponsor and support national and regional research efforts in developing communication technologies at the local levels;
- (b) To promote, plan and coordinate assessment of new communication technology which is to be introduced;
- (c) To promote, support, coordinate and provide guidelines for communication education and training;
- (d) To develop ways of ensuring adequate manpower, financial and technical input into the communication systems;
- (e) To streamline communication activities in various sectors in order to avoid duplication of resources and efforts.¹⁸

The creation of a national body on communication policy is a necessary step in the systematic evolution of a comprehensive national communication policy in African countries.

A communication policy council would provide a forum for discussion, research, could identify priority areas and key positions and could clear the way for eventual implementation. Such a council would likely be the first opportunity for a meeting of minds among all concerned as well as for the gathering of information from the many fields.¹⁹

A national council on communication policy, if established, would need to be given the necessary political support, financial and technical resources as well as some amount of legal authority to function effectively.

The strategy for formulating a comprehensive national communication policy in Africa requires a survey of existing communication infrastructure and an inventory of regulations governing communication and telecommunications systems and of all international agreements relating to information and communication to which the country is a signatory. Also required is an inventory of the financial, human and physical resources involved in communication and telecommunications in each country. The knowledge acquired from the survey and inventory will be needed to guide the policy-making process.

A national communication policy formulated in each African country would specify measures which would aim at:

- (a) Adapting both imported communication technologies and traditional media to the peculiar development needs and goals and cultural values of the society;
- (b) Encouraging the growth and development of a more decentralized and participatory communication systems in the country;
- (c) Effecting greater geographical spread in the distribution of communication and telecommunications facilities;
- (d) Generating a national recognition of information as a prime national resource to be produced, processed, managed and distributed for the benefit of the entire population; and
- (e) Making communication strategies and processes integral components of "all socio-economic, political and cultural development programmes in the country.

A national communication policy in Sub-Saharan African countries needs to spell out clearly and comprehensively the roles, social functions and goals of communication and telecommunications systems in the society. These would include:

1. To support national socio-economic and cultural development efforts and to facilitate popular participation in decision-making on national issues.

2. To facilitate access to information on social, economic and political issues of public importance.
3. To pursue the public's right to know about significant events in their environment which affect their life.
4. To provide a diversity of opinions and viewpoints on national issues.
5. To foster national unity and consciousness.
6. To safeguard the sovereignty of the nation.

Communication technology processes and strategies are vital components in attaining such development goals in African countries as increased agricultural production, increased industrial output, increased literacy levels, better health among the population and political stability and credibility in national leaders. Thus it is important to integrate any national communication formulated in Africa into the economic, political, cultural and educational goals of the society. Such a policy must both be based on and aim at preserving nationally recognized fundamental values which underline the socio-cultural life of the people in each African country.

Information has become a powerful instrument in international trade and diplomacy and also an important tool for cultural domination. Communication technology such as the telephone, telex and satellites are employed in virtually all African countries to transmit and receive information across national borders. Transnational corporations and their local affiliates, banks, oil companies and airlines carry out their daily operations in many African countries mainly through information flows. Also African countries are signatories to a number of international agreements which, in many ways, relate to information and communication. African countries have formed such continent-wide organizations as the Pan African News Agency, the Pan-African Telecommunications Network, the Union of Radio and Television Networks in Africa and the Pan-African Federation of Film Makers. African countries also belong to such international groups as the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool, the International Telecommunication Union, UNESCO and the Inter-governmental Bureau for Informatics, all of which deal with communication and information.

Thus, any comprehensive national communication policy formulated in Africa must have an international dimension. It must seek to support and maintain the positive aspects of each country's relationship with all international agencies which work in information and communication; it must seek to further cooperative efforts in communication and telecommunications among nations in the Africa region in particular and in the Third World in general; and it must seek to support and encourage regional collaborative research efforts to develop communication technology in

Africa to meet local needs and conditions, and to reduce the continents' dependence on imported communication hardware and software.

To be comprehensive and overall, a national communication policy should encompass all components of communication systems. It must cover the print media, radio and television broadcasting, film, news agency, telecommunication services, traditional media, and new communication technology such as videocassette recorders. It must also deal with communication education, training and research, informatics and transborder data flow as well as with advertising and public relations. A national communication policy formulated in Africa should be flexible and future-oriented to allow for changes, whenever necessary, to deal with problems and issues which future developments in communication technology may bring up.

Conclusion

Communication and information play an important role in national development. They can aid and enhance the process of socio-economic, political and cultural change. Most development programmes and activities are information-related or information-dependent in one way or another.²⁰ Communication facilities, systems and processes could be, as Katz has remarked, powerful allies of development forces in society.²¹

A principal position of this paper is that communication is a crucial resource in the development process in Africa. The effectiveness and contribution of communication in societal change and development depend on the extent to which communication strategies, facilities and processes are systematically and consciously integrated into overall planning for national development. A prerequisite for such integration is the formulation of a comprehensive national communication policy that would effect a more equitable development of communication facilities and resources in Africa, and facilitate a more effective contribution of communication technology to development efforts.

This paper has attempted to identify certain general factors which have to be considered in formulating comprehensive national communication policy for development in Africa. A variable that could be most strongly determinant of the evolution and implementation of such a policy is political will and commitment on the part of national leaders, to initiate and sustain the process. As Rosario-Braid has aptly observed, a comprehensive, systematic and coherent national communication policy "is going to rock a few boats but formulating one is essential in the long run if a society is to survive in a world that is being increasingly run by those who control communication."²²

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