Research Priorities for Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: Breaking More Communication Bottlenecks Than Creating Them

by Cornelius B. Pratt*

Abstract

This paper proposes a conceptual framework of agenda dynamics that will guide communication research priorities on the designing and implementation of reoriented development programmes in the African context. The framework consists of three agendas - group, traditional/urban media, and public policy. The paper advocates the integration of all three agendas into a unified, coherent strategy. The advantages of such an integrated strategy include a demonstrated effort by the development specialist to maximize the inputs of rural residents into development programmes early on, and a narrowing of the gaps among policy-makers, traditional/urban media institutions and the target groups. Such linkages also permit the identification of communication research priorities for a continuing programme of development, the coordination of such research among all three agendas, and the coordination of development efforts among change agencies.

Résumé

Cet article propose un cadre conceptuel des dynamiques de programmes qui guiderait les priorités de recherches en matière de communication pour la conception et l'exécution de programmes de développement réorientés dans le contexte africain. Le cadre comporte trois volets-groupe traditionnel media urbain et politique générale. L'article préconise l'intégration de ces trois volets en une stratégie unifiée et cohérente. Les avantages d'une telle stratégie intégré comprennent les efforts ménes par les spécialites du développement en vue de maximiser les contributions des residents des zones rurales aux programmes de développement et la réduction du fossé entre les décideurs, les intitutions de média urbainnes et traditionnelles et les groupes cibles. De tels liens permettent également l'identification des priorités de recherche en matière de communication, pour un programme de développement suivi, la coordination de ces recherches sur les trois violets ainsi que la coordination des efforts de développement entre les agences.

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In 1985 and in 1986, three major events of significance to Africa's development went on record. First, in July 1985, African heads of state and government of the OAU adopted Africa's Priority Programme for Economic Recovery (APPER), a five-year plan that will "pave the way for national and collective self-reliant and self-sustained growth and development" in the continent. Second, in May 1986, parliamentarians from 29 African countries met in Harare, Zimbabwe, for the first All-Africa Parliamentary Conference on Population and Development. They stressed the need for "balance between the needs and opportunities of our people on the one hand and available resources on the other." Finally, also in May 1986, for the first time in the 40-year history of the United Nations, the General Assembly devoted a special session to the rehabilitation and development of African countries. On June 1, 1986, the Assembly adopted the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development 1986-1990, which details a recovery plan that includes policy changes by African governments and increased support from the international community.

Within the past decade, similar measures have been adopted to promote economic recovery and development on the continent. Most notable are the OAU's Monrovia Strategy for the Development of Africa and the Lagos Plan of Action for Economic Development of Africa. Others are the 1984 Kilimanjaro Objectives on Population, the United Nations Industrial Development Decade for Africa, the United Nations Transportation and Communications Decade for Africa, the Harare Declaration on the Food Crisis in Africa, and the UNESCO recommendations on communication research and planning made during its 1981 Nairobi conference.

Taken together, these bold declarations indicate a new resolve by Africans and members of the international community to respond differently to the bleak economic situation in the world's poorest continent. The Nairobi conference, for example, recommended that communication research in Africa be self-reliant and that it be geared toward rural audiences (Ugboajah, 1985a). Toward that end, this paper outlines the directions of such research priorities by examining the characteristics of three unified agendas as a prelude toward developing communication strategies for development. This paper, in effect, takes the position that researches on agenda dynamics in the African context are ingredients that shape the development strategies of the continent. Or, stated another way, the research perspectives

proposed in this paper enable development agents to rethink their strategies, thereby breaking more communication bottlenecks than creating them.

THE NEED FOR NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Even though communication plays a significant role in national development (Lerner, 1964; Rogers, 1969; Golding, 1974; Schramm and Lerner, 1976; Katz, 1977; Teheranian, Hakimzadeh and Vidale, 1977; Bordenave 1977), there is still competitive squabbling over what development means and over how national governments and international agencies can better achieve development in the Third World (Vogeler and de Souza, 1980). Some arguments contend that development programs have overlooked the structural limitations of African communications systems (Haule, 1984; Boafo, 1985); others the core value boundaries of the African (Obeng-Quaidoo, 1985).

Furthermore, during the past decade, a fragile consensus has emerged, particularly among Third World development specialists, that the methods by which communications are used for development in the Third World are flawed and that new strategies are required (Beltran S, 1976; Bordenave, 1976; Ugboajah, 1985b; Haule, 1984; Boafo, 1985; Obeng-Quaidoo, 1985). Culture-specific communication strategies for development have, therefore, been advocated, based on the common agreement about the unsuitability of Western development models. Haule (1985) and Boafo (1985), on the one hand, call for a restructuring of communication in Africa. Obeng-Quaidoo (1985), on the other, emphasizes the need for communications research methodologies to be linked to the core values of the African: the role of the Supreme God or Allah, the concept of time, the function of work as a necessity for survival, and the non-individuality of the African.

Additionally, Ascroft (1981) identifies factors that pose serious problems to development. Such factors are the lack of an equitable system for delivering knowledge and skills and the lack of cooperation of the local people in the designing, planning, and implementation of development projects.

The persistent failure of such programs reflects, among other things, the failure of policies to transform the structurally maladjusted African economies. As Adedeji (1986:5) notes, "a fundamental structural change is a sine qua non for putting

Africa's economies on the road to growth and development." Perhaps this explains why Tanzania's much-touted "transformation approach" and the 1967 Arusha Declaration, by which it declared its indigenous development strategy that required a revamping of the country's institutions, failed to bring about an economic transformation (Coulson, 1982; Eicher, 1984).

From the communication research perspective, Melkote and Babbili (1985) note that research on the diffusion of innovations, for example, fails to identify the (1) type of media messages the audience is exposed to; (2) degree to which the audience internalizes messages; (3) extent of the audience's knowledge before an exposure to innovations; and (4) receiver's "how-to" knowledge.

Rather than addressing these failings, there has been an overwhelming interest among communication researchers in the socio-psychological factors of the receiver rather than in the characteristics of the development models. Consequently, Boafo (1985), on the one hand, suggests that a more appropriate strategy for development must start with **research** into developing communication structures. Myrdal (1973), Awa (1979), and Obeng-Quaidoo (1985), on the other, suggests that **research** be reconceptualized to address the cultural and political realities of the developing region. And the UNESCO-sponsored conference on communication research and national planning underscored, among other things, the need for regional self-reliance in the development of communication research (Ugboajah, 1985a).

African countries have one key element in common: their lack of self-reliant and self-sustaining economies. Because of the sectoral importance of economic self-sufficiency to the other sectors of a society, and because of sectoral interdependence, economic underdevelopment in one sector results in a similar underdevelopment in other sectors. The obsession of African governments with development is underscored by their emphasis on development programs in their annual budgets. Consequently, sub-Saharan African governments have periodically implemented development programs that have used mass and traditional media to strut the strengths and benefits of such programs to their audiences. (Zambia is, for the first time, using the mass media to direct an education campaign on family life toward women and youth, who account for about 75% of its population. The campaign is supported by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities.)

This paper does not attempt to detail the shortcomings of models of development in sub-Saharan Africa, for it is increasingly

becoming common knowledge why the various communication strategies for the development of the continent fall short of their objectives. Rather, it establishes the need for new research directions in the use of communications for development in Africa. And it outlines research priorities that focus on unified agendas that are rooted in the socio-cultural and socio-economic characteristics of the region. These agendas should be of interest to governmental and international agencies that are striving for the development of the continent.

THE AGENDA-SETTING FRAMEWORK

The seminal studies on media agenda-setting conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and by Shaw and McCombs (1977) indicate that when the media emphasize political events, the degree of importance - that is, salience - U.S. publics ascribe to such events influences what they learn from the media. Similar findings on election and non-election issues have also been identified among audiences in other developed countries (Siune and Borne, 1975; Soderlund et al., 1980; Black and Snow, 1982; Winter et al., 1982; Gadir, 1972; and Asp, 1983). Even in a U.S. community with limited access to the mass media, the media also set the agendas for local issues during an off-election year (Williams and Larsen, 1977). Furthermore, media agenda-setting is also effective in the transfer of detailed information about a single, non-election issue to U.S. audiences (Atwater et al., 1985).

Cobb and Elder (1972) also developed a similar perpective on agenda-building, that is, the process by which issues originate and become the focus of concern and interest for policy-makers and for the public.

On the comparative effects of newspapers and television on agenda-setting, newspapers are generally more effective than television (Patterson and McLure, 1976; Williams and Larsen, 1977), particularly at the subissue level (Benton and Frazier, 1976). On the agenda-setting influence of television, McCombs (1976) and Hill (1985) found that the power of television news is influenced by viewer characteristics and viewing traits. And Behr and Inyengar (1985) found that while the public agenda was indeed affected by what television journalists and editors chose, real-world conditions and events provided an independent impetus to the public's perceived importance of issues.

But the casual relationship between media content and public agendas have been varied and inconclusive (Patterson and

McClure, 1976). Additionally, major weaknesses of agenda-setting research have been identified, namely, its lack of a direction of causality between content and salience variables and the failure of researchers to recognize the effects of direct experience on individuals' political concerns (Iyengar, 1979; Lang and Lang, 1981; Behr and Iyengar, 1985).

Perhaps because the media agenda-setting hypothesis focuses on the mass media which are limited in sub-Saharan Africa, the hypothesis receives limited support in Africa. A test of the hypothesis in Ghana indeed showed a qualified support for it: influence was greater among Ghanian elites than among non-elites (Anokwa and Salwen, 1986). However, evidence shows that the **interaction** among mass media and interpersonal communication sources is more important for agricultural development projects than any one of the communication sources (Abbott and Leon, 1986).

Given the limited availability of the mass media in sub-Saharan Africa and the recent evidence on media agenda-setting (Behr and Iyengar, 1985), and on communication sources for agricultural development in a Third World nation (Abbott and DeLeon, 1986), it is important that communication researchers identify a research framework which will guide the implementation of Africa's development programs.

THE AGENDA-SETTING FRAMEWORK FOR AFRICA

What will such a research framework look like? Such a framework will be based on the model of agenda dynamics developed by Manheim (forthcoming) and modified by Manheim and Pratt (1986); it is a framework of integrated agendas that focuses on the internal dynamics of each agenda, as well as on the relationships among, and influences on, them.

Admittedly, and as stated earlier, the agenda-setting concept is based on research conducted among U.S. audiences and widely applied to those of other developed countries. Also as already noted, this framework underscores the importance of the modern mass media in influencing what audiences in media-saturated countries know about, think about, and talk about. However, research on the news-dissemination pattern in sub-Saharan Africa has indicated that audiences use interpersonal and traditional media sources often than they use the modern mass media (Uche, 1985; Ugboajah, 1985c). This means that communication sources other than the mass media may indeed set

the agenda in the Third World. Research in this area has just begun. But studies on news-and information-dissemination in Africa lead to a modified conceptualization of three major agendas whose characteristics are typical of the African environment. They are the group agenda, the traditional/urban media agenda, and the public policy agenda.

THE GROUP AGENDA

The group agenda is composed of those issues about which rural residents indicate some concern. Such issues do not necessarily have to be directly related to development. This agenda has three dimensions: familiarity, that is, group awareness of a given issue; group salience, that is, perceived relevance of an issue to the well-being of a group; and favourability, that is, group evaluation of a specific issue or issues (Manheim and Pratt, 1986). The rationale for this agenda is the tendency for rural Africans to organize their daily activities in group settings. Thus, employing the core value boundary of the group, this agenda is primarily an explanatory, problem-solving one. The researcher may seek answers to questions posed to rural groups:

- What are the most important issues facing a group, and how familiar are group members with these issues?
- To what extent are such issues perceived as salient by the group?
- What are the group's preferences for development issues and themes?
- How can the group best respond to these issues?
- Has the group been exposed to development programs? For how long? And how was such exposure received?

The researcher, therefore, studies the group, identifying group issues with some implications for development. Thus group agenda studies development as a problem-solving activity and makes development an endogenous effort. In other words, the recipients of the benefits and costs of development are also instrumental in shaping the development effort.

Let me illustrate how the group agenda can possibly be applied to development programs on food and nutrition and on population issues. First, some background. The top priority of the Lagos Plan of Action, iterated in the Addis Ababa economic declaration, is responding to food and agricultural problems in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa, which has one of the world's fastest population growth rates, has a significant share of nutritional problems. It is

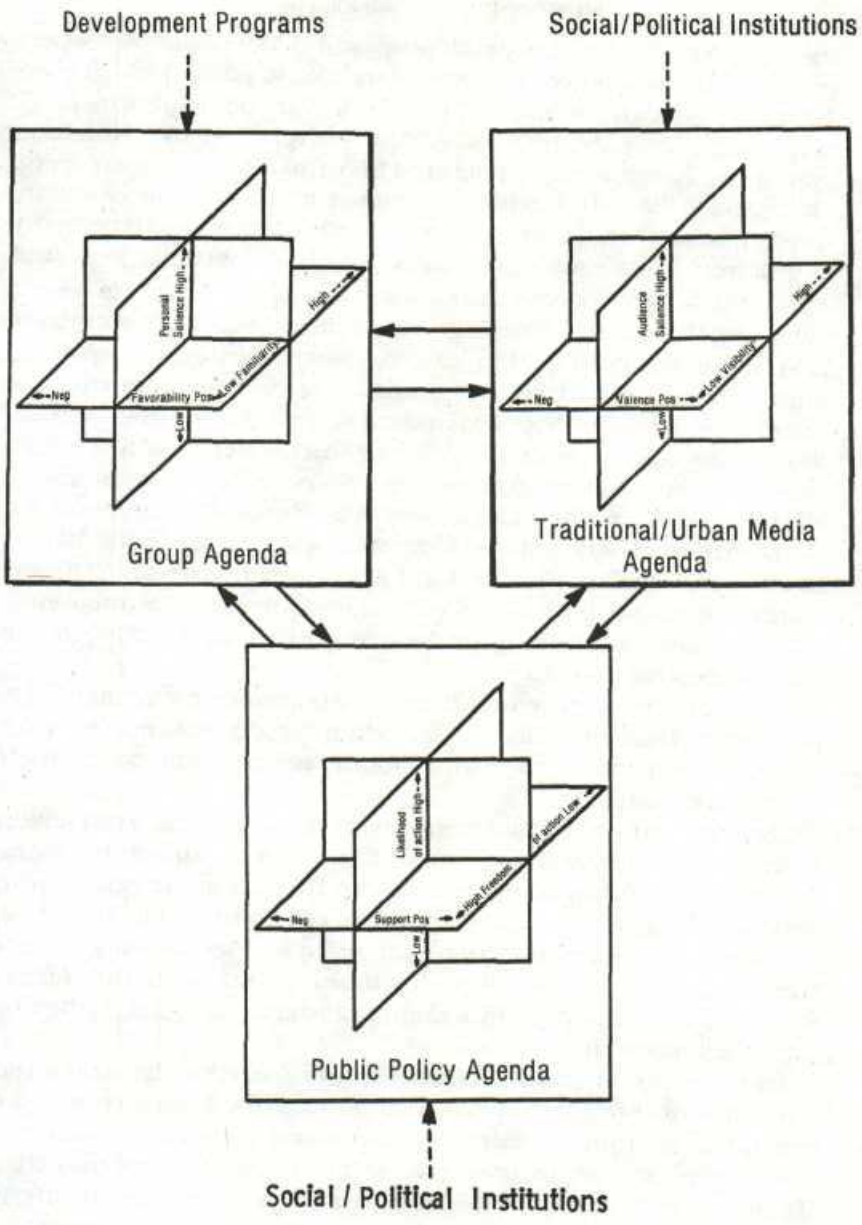

Figure 1
Agenda Dynamics and Development Strategies

the only region in the developing world, for example, where nutrition has worsened in recent years (World Bank: 1984). Of the 10 countries with the highest calorie deficits per capita in 1983, seven were in sub-Saharan Africa (Murphy, 1985). Nutrition programs, therefore, have potential benefits for the African (Berg, 1973). Such benefits include increased adult work productivity through better health, resistance to infection, improved receptivity of children to education, reduction in child mortality rate, and improved family income and social well-being. There is also a substantial amount of savings on medical costs. It is estimated that more than $6 billion can be saved through nutritional improvement. Nutrition programs designed to improve the nutritional status of populations can extend the working years of individuals, and decrease the countries' dependency ratio. (In sub-Saharan Africa, except in Gabon and South Africa, at least 45% of all children are younger than 15 years (Goliber, 1985), and there are about 76 dependents per 100 persons of working age (Berg, 1973).) Lower dependency ratios brought about by improved nutritional status means an increase in per capita income. A reduction in adult mortality rate through improved nutrition also adds years to income-generating lives.

Given the importance of nutrition to national development, it is important that nutrition information be communicated with targeted audiences to bring about improvements in their nutritional status.

The basic unit of social arrangement in the sub-Saharan region is the small, cultural group. The small groups are structured along kinship roles and social institutions and are closely integrated into various village or kinship groups. Most communication, therefore, is based on face-to-face relationships. Additionally, mass communication is not fully developed in sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in a majority of its audiences remaining untouched by any mass medium.

Thus, researchers can observe the group agenda dynamics and the culture-specific patterns of food habits which can be incorporated into a nutrition education program. Given the obstacle in the use of survey research in the developing countries (Bulmer and Warwick, 1983), such an observation can be effectively done by using ethnographic methods of the social anthropologist to identigy and explain a wide range of sociological phenomena which are intrinsically inaccessible to statistical investigations of any kind (Leach, 1977:77). Selected cultural food habits will be integrated into communication programs based on the empirical

perception of such habits in affecting the nutritional health of residents one way or another.

Research is also required to identify, at the local level,culturally acceptable institutions which will encourage a broadened access to, and a direct participation in, a nutrition program. Too much time and too many resources are wasted on top-heavy public institutions whose selection has hitherto been based on gut feelings, rather than on empirical evidence of their support of the feasibility aspects in development programs.

Also, development programs in most Third World nations have, for example, utilized group fantasy events, that is, playing out dramatic situations, real or fictitious, in a lively, animated and boisterous tone in order to fulfill a group's basic needs. But there is hardly any significant inventory or research data on group fantasies dealing with events that actually happened to the group, that were the focus of the traditional/urban media agenda, or that were part of the community folklore. What will be the systematic applications of such group fantasies to nutrition and population issues? What local actors will command instant reverence among audiences? And, what is the process by which the fantasy events establish new population or nutritional "nodes" (that is, foci around which a great deal of attention is centered), which can influence attitudes toward nutritional health and family size? Answers to these questions will make development programs rely on scientific notions about a wide range of socio-cultural phenomena and group dynamics.

TRADITIONAL/URBAN MEDIA AGENDA

The agenda dynamic model, as applied in the developed countries, places overwhelming emphasis on the mass media as sources of influence. The media agenda has three dimensions: visibility, that is, amount of media coverage of development news; group salience, that is, the relevance of media content to group needs, and valence, that is, the portrayal of development news as favourable, neutral, or unfavourable (Manheim and Pratt, 1986).

The effects of the urban media agenda are generally moderate in the developing countries, as research on Ghanaian (Anokwa and Salwen, 1986) and Dominican (Abbott and de Leon, 1986) audiences indicates. The dynamics of the urban media are also far from being fully investigated. What, for example, are the dominant characteristics of the urban media agenda for development news? Is such an agenda salient only to the urban elite? Fair's (1986)

preliminary findings on the neglect of the "basic needs information" and of the explanative dimensions of development communication by the **Daily Times** of Nigeria, a largely government-owned newspaper, and the **Fraternite-Martin** of Côte d'Ivoire, a government-owned newspaper, point to a paradox. Sub-Saharan African governments official statements portend a reliance on the mass media to support development programs, yet it is such a patron-client relationship that may be responsible for the media's neglect of development communication. The reason is clear. In general, African governments adhere to the "development theory" of the media, which means the dissemination of positive news and the suppression of negative news. Because the government is the media's largest beat, media reliance on government news sources perpetuates a patron-client relationship that undermines the significance of critical media presentation and evaluation of development news. Are the (urban) journalistic perceptions of development, therefore, consistent with or different from those of the rural masses? What independent variables explain such perceptions? How do such perceptions perpetuate patron-client ties, and with what costs to development? Finally, with the advent of sophisticated communication infrastructures in the region, what changes can be expected in the media agenda? Will there be a continued emphasis on the interests of the urban elite? A balance between the interests of urban and rural residents? Or will such technologies create more exclusive media "haves" and "have-nots"?

Even though traditional media are commonly used, research on their dynamics is minuscule. Ordinarily, folklore, drama, puppetry and cultural artifacts have been used in the delivery of development information. (In most urban centers, television drama is **the** medium for such information.) But many research questions remain unanswered: What development themes can most effectively be used in delivering development information? What cultural artifacts are also more effective? Which are "turn-offs"? Are there any cultural preferences among traditional audiences? Are such preferences related to message themes? What are the independent effects of traditional media in setting the agenda on development?

The study by Anokwa and Salwen (1986) indicates significant relationships between urban media agenda and the agenda of the Ghanaian elite, but not of the non-elite. Is there, therefore, a journalistic preference for the interests of the elite? Are such interests inconsistent with those whose stakes in the fruits of

development are high? If so, is the slack picked up by the traditional media? If not, why not?

PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA

Policy agenda comprises those items which decision-makers have formally accepted for serious consideration (Cobb, et al., 1976). Its dimensions are the freedom of action available to policy-makers, the likelihood that policy-makers will take any action, and the degree of positive or negative support for those with interests in the action.

African governments have, since attaining independence from colonial administrations, deliberated on development strategies for the region. Such deliberations have, in some parts, included the urban elite and the urban mass media. Cases in point are the heated debates on the nature of the Nigerian civilian government, following the daparture of the Obasanjo administration in 1979. Even in the current military administrations of Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana and Liberia, such debates are extant.

Communication policies have also been developed in international forums. For example, the 1980 UNESCO-sponsored Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies (which produced the Yaounde Declaration) affirmed to strengthen the identity and independence of communications in Africa. In 1981, a similar UNESCO-sponsored conference in Nairobi resolved to achieve regional self-reliance in communication research, among other things.

But communication researchers would do well to content-analyze such policy deliberations and identify how well they are borne out in reality. As Ugboajah (1985a) observes, perhaps only Ghana and Nigeria, among West African countries, show some progress toward achieving some of the objectives of the Yaounde Declaration. In addition, Adedeji (1985) describes the five-year progress toward the implementation of the Lagos Plan of Action as slow. Communication research within the policy agenda framework will ascertain the possible role of communication in the implementation of policies on development, that is, the extent to which the media offer alternative policies and debate policy changes.

LINKAGES AND PRIMARY INFLUENCES

Answers to the research questions posed by each agenda cannot, in and out of themselves, provide comprehensive guidelines for development. The group agenda, for example, has little significance for the communication researcher unless it is integrated with the other two. This simply means that the findings of group agenda research, for example, should come to bear on research findings on the (1) editorial processes of the urban media vis-a-vis agenda-setting; (2) folklore-selection process of the traditional media vis-a-vis agenda-setting; and (3) public policy agenda among decision-makers. By the same token, research on public policy agenda should relate directly on the group and media agendas. As Fair (1986) note, patron-client relationships between the media and the powers-that-be undermine the extent to which two African media set the agenda for development issues. Therefore, Ugboajah (1985a) suggests that a collaboration among international agencies in communication research could narrow the gaping chasm between communication research and policy-making.

Beyond these linkages, each agenda may be influenced independently of the other two. The essential argument here is that the dynamics of the group agenda may be influenced primarily by development campaign programs. But such an influence will be effective to the extent that the dynamics of the group agenda allow. That is to say, group agenda dynamics are not entirely passive and will mitigate against any eternal influences that are perceived as threatening.

The traditional media agenda responds to external influences in much the same manner as the group agenda; however, the urban media agenda does not exist independently - at least in those media systems in Africa that are "authoritarian-tending." Fair's (1986) findings on patron-client relationships in Africa further underscore this possibility. Also, in the United States, the media agendas have been shown to be susceptible to those of social groups, local institutions, and public officials (Cobb and Elder, 1972; Weaver and Elliott, 1985; Berkowitz, 1986). This means that a prominent news source can have a major influence on the subsequent media agenda, but that journalists also play a significant part in shaping this agenda.

Entry into such policy-making agenda (that is, outside of the linkages) poses the greatest challenge to the communication researcher and development agent inasmuch as the decision-makers demonstrate a high degree of insensitivity to public

interests as represented in the group and traditional/urban media agendas. The Nigerian urban media during the Buhari administration and those of single-party states in Africa provide illustrations of this phenomenon. The extent to which entry into this agenda can be made is, therefore, a function of the extent to which the state encourages political competition and skeins of alternative viewpoints on public policies.

This agenda research framework has several advantages. First, it identifies, without being country-specific, the research priorities for the development of one of the world's least developed regions, and underscores the significance of research and fact-finding as a forerunner of any long-range development activity. With the dearth of information on rural residents, their traditional information sources, their relationships and perceptions of urban institutions, and their attitudes toward development, it behoves the researcher to understand the agenda dynamics in order to more effectively fulfill his or her role in the development process.

Second, the framework is premised on Africans "playing a home game," and on the willingness of the communication researcher to relate to the wisdom of community groups, rather than to ignore it; to work **with** rural residents, rather than **for** them; and to communicate **with** them, rather than **to** them. Thus, the researcher uses an ethnographic strategy by utilizing "grass-roots" organizations and rural groups to provide research evidence on various facets of the environment. One of the shortcomings of Third World development planning has been that government investment policies have been dictated by a preferential treatment for the needs of the urban elite over those of the rural populations (Lipton, 1977; Eicher, 1984). Research on the group agenda dynamics addresses such a weakness. In other words, the real targets of development programs - the rural residents - are not ignored early on, making the consequenses of such development an indigenous collective effort. Such a method is consistent with the so-called "greenhouse" approach which focuses on using factors that help local efforts grow on their own, rather than on organizing people for purposes beyond their comprehension and interest (Hyden, 1986).

Furthermore, this framework builds an inventory of empirical evidence that can be systematically applied over time to similar development projects. Yet another advantage of the framework is that it emphasized linkages and feedback among the three agendas. Such linkages have three further advantages. First, they reduce the possibility for excessive agenda (or institutional) self-

focus, thereby narrowing the gaps among policy-makers, traditional and urban media institutions and the target groups. The payoff will be a translation of research findings into policies and of policies into programs of action. Second, they continually refocus institutions and audiences in each agenda on the value of the total development program to the other agendas - a situation that augurs well for coordinating development efforts at different institutional levels. Third, they provide a rationale for studying other perceptions that characterize such linkages.

Finally, even though this framework is conceptually framed largely within a framework developed in the developed societies, it raises focal questions for research that strike at the heart of the continuing problems of development in the region. Taken together, these advantages provide a meaningful configuration of agenda characteristics from which will be generated development-oriented communication research priorities.

INSTITUTIONAL ROLE

One of the responsibilities of the ACCE is that it is a clearing house of information on various communication issues on the continent. The ACCE should, therefore, more effectively reduce waste created by the duplication of research and consultancy efforts by encouraging long-term collaboration between it and similar institutions on the continent and elsewhere. The ACCE Institute for Communication Research and Development documentation centre and other communication research centres in Africa and foreign universities, as well as those in other institutions, should be encouraged to fund demonstration projects that could be conducted or coordinated by the ACCE. (One such possible joint project between the ACCE and the Johns Hopkins University Population Communication Services may identify population issues that merit priority concern in select countries in sub-Saharan Africa.) Academics from such research centres can make their expertise available to the ACCE on an ad hoc, if not on a continuing, basis. The ACCE should also use research forums to interface with academic and professional groups on the one hand, and with its many publics on the other. Finally, the ACCE can independently fund research projects whose results may be published in professional and academic journals, and have such funding appended to such articles.

CONCLUSIONS

The inherent weaknesses in the application of development strategies in sub-Saharan Africa have nudged international and governmental agencis into rethinking Africa's development crises. This paper proposes the use of agenda dynamics as a framework for identifying research priorities for the development of the sub-Saharan African region. Research questions that will guide the region's development programs are posed. Communication research of any kind in Africa is minuscule. Beyond that, the dependence on research perspectives that do little to understand the dynamics of the African environment will result in a slowdown in the region's development and in the creation of more communication bottlenecks. It is, therefore, important that the lessons from group dynamics guide not only the communication researcher but the policy-maker, the traditional/urban media institution, the recipient of the development, and the change agency as well.

Given sub-Saharan Africa's worsening economy - increasing unemployment, inflation and foreign debts, declining gross domestic product, and scarcity of basic commodities - such impoverished nations now live on the edge of a dream that has been deeply shadowed by recurrent economic crisis. It is important that the region's institutions of higher learning, with the support of international and governmental agencies, encourage long-term communication research geared toward charting and coordinating the development efforts of agencies. Forums and institutions have had their field days deliberating on the need for communication research. And this paper has provided an outline of such research priorities. The dangers of a continuing delay in bringing development programs to a larger segment of the growing population will result in an increasing vulnerability of the rural poor to starvation, malnutrition and low-living standards. Sub-Saharan African governments and development agencies must, therefore, hasten to lend their support to communication research in the African context.

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