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Sources of Development Information Among Rural Women in Nigeria: A Case Study

by Chinyere Stella Okunna*

Abstract

Communication has become widely accepted all over the developing world as a potent tool for rural development. However, this faith in the power of development communication often appears to be misplaced, as development fails to measure up to expectations even after huge resources have been invested in development communication. Many of the failures of development communication projects arise from the application of inappropriate development paradigms and communication strategies which overemphasize the mass media as channels of communication in the development process. This paper is based on a study carried out to find out what communication media are used by rural women in Nigeria as sources of development information.

*Mrs. Chinyere Stella Okunna teaches in the Mass Communication Department, the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu, Nigeria.

Sources d'Information sur le Développement au sein des Femmes au Nigéria

par Stella Okunna

Résumé

La communication est aujourd'hui largement acceptée au sein des pays en voie de développement comme un instrument potentiel pour le développement rural. Cependant, cette fois dans la communication de développement semble souvent déplacée d'autant plus que bien souvent le développement n'est pas à la hauteur des résultats escomptés, même après avoir investi des ressources immenses dans la communication de développement.

La plupart des échecs des projets de la communication de développement proviennent de l'application inappropriée des paradigmes de développement et des stratégies de communication qui mettent trop d'accent sur les masses médias comme des voies de communication du processus de développement. Cette dissertation est basée sur une étude faite en vue de déterminer quels genres de médias de communication sont utilisés par les femmes du milieu rural nigérian, en tant que sources d'information de développement.

Introduction

Development should be a process which aims at achieving self-reliance and improved living conditions for the under-privileged majority of a population. For such people all over the developing world, and who live predominantly in the rural areas, development is today as urgent, or even more urgent, as it was during the development decade of the 1960s. Development communication has become accepted as an integral part of development planning and as an instrument of policy. This is a recognition that communication is a powerful tool for development and should be considered a major development resource (MacBride *et. al.*, 1981). It is now generally accepted that communication can initiate, stimulate and sustain the development process when carefully evolved and applied (Menon, 1986).

But communication has not always been carefully evolved and applied to the process of development, often resulting in the dashing of the high hopes placed on its potency as an instrument of development. Despite massive investments by the United Nations, other multilateral aid agencies and Third World countries themselves, development programmes have failed to measure up to expectation. These failures resulted partly from the application of inappropriate communication strategies and the adoption of wrong development paradigms in the Third World. These paradigms, based on system-specific theoretical assumptions and over-emphasis on mass media technology, were practically non-starters, and have widely been questioned, even by their very architects (Rogers, 1976).

Despite the importance of the mass media in development communication, primarily because of their power to disseminate development messages rapidly over wide areas, it is now generally accepted among development communication experts that the mass media are not the prime movers in development, particularly development that is centred around marginalized groups like rural women. This is because access to the mass media and other forms of communication is an indispensable pre-condition for development and social change (Linden, 1989). But access to the mass media is grossly lacking for rural women in a country like Nigeria where the rural population still depend largely on face-to-face interpersonal communication.

Development programmes in Nigeria have continued to fail because the government and its agents have persistently placed the mass media, rather than people, at the centre of development communication. Nwuneli (1976) gives as a typical example of such failures, the information campaign during the change of currency in the country.

When in 1972 the Nigerian government changed the country's monetary system from pound to naira, the change was accompanied by campaigns on television, radio and newspapers. Two years after the change, villagers in many parts of the country were still transacting business in the old currency which had by then ceased to be legal tender. The conclusion drawn by the government and many Nigerians was that the information about the currency change never got to those villages, reflecting the poor reach of the mass media as sources of information for rural dwellers.

Purpose of Study

The present study was carried out to determine the sources of development information for rural women in Nigeria, using the messages of the "Better Life for Rural Women Programme" as a case in point. In Nigeria, although rural dwellers in general are underprivileged, rural women are more severely underprivileged and marginalized. Any development programme that has rural women as its target audience can, therefore, be considered to exemplify the urgent need for development in the rural areas. The "Better Life Programme" (BLP) was initiated to enhance the self-reliance of rural women and improve their standards of living.

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What are the existing channels of communication within the rural community?
2. What are the mass media use patterns among the rural women?
3. What are the major sources of development information for the rural women?
4. Which media/channels of communication are preferred by the women as sources of development communication?

Literature Review

The findings from recent development communication research at both the macro and micro levels point to the conclusion that the mass media are neither prime sources of information nor prime movers in rural development. Using a combination of the survey and participant observation methods, Hartman and his colleagues (1989) did a macro-level study of the role played by the mass media in promoting social change and development in Indian villages. The study found that in most respects, mass communication was a far less important source

of information and influence than interpersonal communication in the adoption of new agricultural and health practices.

Also stressing the importance of interpersonal traditional media in rural development, Ugboajah (1986) points out that these "oramedia" are more appropriate for the oral and communalistic cultures of rural populations in Africa, than the mass media which have been organized in the context of the already atomized Western societies. Nevertheless, mass communication, specifically radio, has been found to be an important source of information for rural dwellers. In his study of sources of political information among 375 people in a rural community in Nigeria, Okigbo (1990) found that radio was the highest source of information, even when compared with such other sources as relatives, traditional rulers, political candidates and other mass media. It is noteworthy, however, that the findings also showed that radio was closely followed in importance by relatives as a source of information. Okigbo's findings are similar to those of Sobowale and Sogbanmu (1984) in their study of innovation adoption among rural fishermen in Nigeria. According to the researchers, the study confirmed "the pervasiveness of radio as a medium of communication among rural populations." The findings also showed the importance of interpersonal communication sources, in the form of officials (government "change agents") and relatives. This complementarity between mass media and interpersonal channels as sources of information for rural population was also demonstrated in Fisher's (1990) study of community radio as a tool for development. This was a survey of six community radio projects in Liberia, Sri Lanka, India, Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Jamaica. Fisher found that all the projects showed that "radio in itself is insufficient for effective development," and that "interpersonal interaction and other media must play a role."

Consequently, one conclusion that runs through contemporary development communication literature is echoed in Moemeka's (1987) observation that:

In rural development activities, the media of mass communication can hardly operate successfully alone. They need the support and intervention of interpersonal channels of communication, as well as traditional modes of person to person communication.

Research Method

This was a case study of a rural development project in Inyi, a community in Enugu State, Nigeria. The pottery project was sponsored under the "Better Life for Rural Women Programme". The population

for the study comprised 112 rural women who were members of the three cooperative societies which were jointly executing the project.

The measuring instrument was a 66-item interview schedule which was used to gather both biographic data and data on communication within the community and between the women and BLP personnel in the state capital.

Results

A total of 109 of the 112 women were successfully interviewed, representing a high response rate of 97%.

About 35% of the women had no formal education; 5% had some primary education; 25% were educated up to the first school-leaving certificate level which by the current low standards of education in the country, particularly in rural areas, is little better than not being educated. In effect, therefore, 65% of the women had little or no formal education.

In response to questions on whether they could read and write, and in what language(s) they were literate, 35% of the respondents indicated that they could neither read nor write in any language; 13% could read and write in their native Igbo language; 17% were literate in English language; while another 35% were literate in both Igbo and English.

Electronic Media Ownership/Access

Almost all the women (96%) owned radio sets and the few who did not had access to the medium. On the other hand, 53% owned television sets, 22% did not own but had access to the medium, while 25% neither owned nor had access to television. It should be pointed out that many of the women who indicated that they owned or had access to television sets said that the sets were actually owned by their sons; the women had access to the sets only when their sons, who lived in the urban areas, were spending some time in the village, mostly during Christmas and other festive and social events.

Sources of General Information

The respondents were asked to indicate — from 15 sources — their main sources of information about happenings around them in general, and about how they first heard of some specific happenings in 1991. The women consistently ranked radio above all other media as a source of information, while some media like magazines, posters,

audio and video cassettes, markets and community development associations did not receive any mention. These responses are shown in Table 1.

Sources of Development Information

When the women were asked about their sources of information regarding a number of development messages which had been sent out by BLP personnel to rural women throughout the state, their responses showed that interpersonal channels like friends/relatives, churches and cooperative societies were important sources of information alongside radio. The respondents were asked to choose three sources, in order of importance, through which they received messages on the following topics: birth control and child spacing (BC/CS); expanded programme on immunization and oral rehydration therapy for babies and young children (EPI/ORT); self-reliance through skill acquisition from membership of cooperative societies and female circumcision.

As Table 2 shows radio, friends, relatives, the church, and meetings with "Better Life Programme" personnel were consistently mentioned in all the three categories as sources of all the development messages used in the study. These four sources were followed in importance by cooperative societies and television which were indicated as sources of information in all cases except for the message on female circumcision where television did not receive a 3rd choice mention while cooperative societies were not mentioned in the 1st and 3rd choice categories.

Some of the sources (audio cassettes, video cassettes) were not mentioned at all. The respondents were asked more specifically about their sources of information from BLP headquarters concerning the pottery project. Only 6 of the 15 sources were mentioned. The results in Table 3 show the overriding importance of cooperative societies as a source of information in this regard.

Table 1: Sources of General Information

Event	Sources											Total %
	Radio %	TV %	News paper %	Friend Relative %	Trad. Ruler %	Town Crier %	Church %	Coop Soc. %	Meeting with BLP %	Other %	Did not Hear %	
General Happenings	68	5	—	16	—	4	3	4	—	—	—	100
Mrs Babangida's Afr. Prize for BLP.	49	4	2	13	—	—	2	19	9	2	—	100
Revision of Voters' list	57	4	2	7	2	11	12	5	—	—	—	100
Death of Nig. Pilgrims in Saudi Arabia	50	4	4	12	—	—	25	2	—	—	3	100
Creation of States	76	5	—	17	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	100

N = 109 in each case.

Table 2: Sources of Development Information

Source	BC and CS			EPI and ORT			Co-op. Societies			Female Circumcision		
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd
Radio	54	17	4	39	17	15	14	15	15	2	9	1
TV	3	14	2	9	4	6	2	1	2	1	1	-
Newspaper	-	3	9	-	3	2	1	1	1	4	-	1
Magazine	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Poster	1	7	5	1	4	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
Audio Cass.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Video Cass.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Friend/Relative	24	26	23	14	34	25	14	41	30	29	5	2
Trad. Ruler	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
Town Crier	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Church	2	4	6	24	17	15	2	6	7	5	7	2
Market	2	2	8	-	-	1	-	5	4	1	-	-
Dev. Association	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Coop. Society	4	15	18	6	11	9	58	24	11	-	5	-
Meeting with BLP	4	5	10	1	1	2	9	5	4	2	1	2
Health Centre	4	3	1	5	8	8	-	-	-	4	1	-
Drama	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-
Did not Hear/No Choice	2*	4	12	-	-	12	-	2	25	51*	70	91
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

N = 109 in each case.

* = Did not Hear.

Table 3: Sources of Information about Project

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Radio	14	13
TV	2	2
Friends/Relatives	14	13
Church	1	1
Cooperative Society	62	57
Meeting with BLP personnel	16	14
Total	109	100

Preferences for Sources of Development Information

To find out the women's preferred sources of development communication, the respondents were asked which media (interpersonal or mass media) they would prefer BLP personnel to use in communicating with them. A 5-point rating scale of "strongly agree," "agree," "uncertain," "disagree" and "strongly disagree," was used to measure the responses. When asked whether the BLP should make more use of interpersonal channels of communication, the following result emerged (see Table 4):

Table 4: More Use of Interpersonal Communication Channels

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	58	53
Agree	46	42
Uncertain	-	-
Disagree	5	5
Strongly disagree	-	-
Total	109	100

This result is similar to the responses received to the question on whether there should be more face-to-face communication between them and BLP personnel (See Table 5).

Table 5: More Face-to-Face Communication with BLP Personnel

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	93	85
Agree	12	11
Uncertain	1	1
Disagree	3	3
Strongly Disagree	-	-
Total	109	100

A total of 44 respondents (41%) agreed or strongly agreed that the BLP should make greater use of the mass media, while 56 people (51%) disagreed, as shown in Table 6. Out of those who agreed, the majority chose radio as the mass medium which should be used more.

Table 6: More Use of the Mass Media

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	17	16
Agree	27	25
Uncertain	9	8
Disagree	47	43
Strongly disagree	9	8
Total	109	100

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study have confirmed a number of previous research findings about the realities of communication in the rural Third World. One of these is the low literacy level among rural dwellers (especially the women) which constitutes a barrier to exposure to the print media among the rural population.

This study has also confirmed the relative unimportance of the mass media, with the exception of radio, as sources of information for rural

dwellers in Nigeria and the importance of such interpersonal communication channels as friends and relatives. In the context of Nigerian rural women for whom the spirit of cooperation is now being preached as a rallying point for development, it is gratifying to note from the findings of this study that cooperative societies are a major source of development information among the rural women. The church also serves as a strong source of information, having been consistently mentioned as a source of all the development messages used in the study. It is common knowledge that in Nigeria, women are more involved than men in church-going and religious activities in both urban and rural areas. The church could therefore play an important role as a channel of development communication. The role of the church in the dissemination of the type of development messages contained in this study could be considered "neutral," as opposed to its role as a source of political information in a country where politicians are often polarized along religious lines.

From the ongoing discussion, it is clear that any strategy for effectively communicating development programmes to rural women in Nigeria must combine mass communication, particularly radio, with interpersonal interaction, with the combination weighted in favour of interpersonal communication. Such a strategy harnesses and complements the power of the mass media to rapidly and widely disseminate messages and create awareness with that of interpersonal communication to effect the attitude and behaviour changes necessary for development.

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