TOWARDS EFFECTIVE USE OF MASS MEDIA IN NIGERIA'S NATIONAL POPULATION PROJECT

Victor Chukwudi Kogah (Ph.D.)

Abstract

This paper takes a look at the development paradigm which most African countries including Nigeria tended to adopt in the past. It believes people should be the focus of development and their concern and well-being should be paramount. Hence it advocates for the use of the media to mobilize people effectively for development programmes such as the National Population Project. In addition, it reviews the strength and weaknesses of our dominant communication media systems in the National Population Project. It is the belief of this paper that the population project should fight apathy and gross misconceptions often promoted by politicians who wish to hijack population head count for selfish motives. In view of its utility value, this paper sees accurate and credible headcount as an inevitable exercise. Finally, the paper highlights the problems which need to be overcome to achieve success in the March, 2006 National Population Census Project.

Introduction

As a multi ethnic country, Nigeria grapples with enormous problems. Some of these problems include high rate of poverty, unemployment, corruption at high and low places, stunted economic growth, and general underdevelopment in key sectors of the country.

These problems are common to many developing countries as acknowledged by Katz and Wedel (1977). They observed that many developing countries with multi-ethnic background are weak politically and economically, lack social infrastructures, and stable political institutions. Oso (2002) laments that as a country, Nigeria has failed to put in place a stable political philosophy and system, which can guarantee stable economic growth and social transformations at a massive scale. Rather, since independence, the country has not been able to reduce the divisive tendencies and bickering among its federating units. As a direct consequence of this, the country has tried several development initiatives as typified in the development theories discussed below.

The Westernisation Model

Otherwise known as the liberal-conservational model, the Westernization model of development represents a rather capitalist view which looked at development almost solely from the perspective of economic development. It equates development with huge materials and economic growth and rapid urbanization typified in the establishment of big factories, emergence of new urban centers, etc.

Development indices are measured in economic terms such as per capita income and gross domestic product. Less emphasis is placed on human resources development which typically should manifest in more resources going to education and other critical sectors.

Oso (2002) believes that this material thinking on development appears to have dominated the minds of national planners and political leaders. Development, they are made to believe, tended to be synonymous with material economic growth. The model was flawed for its silence on equitable distribution of income and adequate resource generation and exploitation. It was particularly silent on the role of the human resources in national development.

Countries which were unable to fully exploit their resources and transform themselves in material terms were considered underdeveloped. To overcome the burden of underdevelopment, poor countries were encouraged to import their material needs from Europe and America.

The Basic Needs Approach

This approach can be described as the non-ideological model which anchors its thrust on the position of Dudley Sears, the British economist. According to Sears (1978):

The questions to ask about a country's development are what is happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? If all of these have declined, from high levels, then, beyond doubt, this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all these have, it would be strange to call the result development even if per capita income doubled.

This model emphasizes the provision of basic needs to a vast majority of the population. It believes that the key
focus of development should be on the provision of social infrastructures and more attention paid to poverty reduction, and employment generation and greater equality.

Opubor (1985) believes the notion of development is meaningless if it does not take into account fundamental changes in the lives of people, particularly peasants and the masses. Therefore, people should be the focus of development. The human resource a country has is its greatest resource. Any development initiative which fail to take this into account has failed right from the conceptual stage.

**The Marxian - Socialist Model**

While countries in most of the third world with political links to the west adopted the western model, those with links to the former Soviet Union adopted the Marxist-Socialist model which grew out of the socialist philosophy. This model emphasizes efficient distribution of resources at the expense of resource generation, though both are seen as the sole responsibility of the state. As regards poor countries, the model believes that the under-development experienced by these countries is a function of the resources exploitation carried by capitalist countries. It believes that there is a casual relationship between the present state of underdevelopment of most developing countries and the affluent status of western capitalist societies through the instrument of colonialism, resource pillage and capital flight.

**Communication and Development**

To plan adequately for people along development terms, there is the need to have good understanding of the needs of a given population. The credible channel to achieve that is through communication. Communication is fundamental to the realization of sustainable development. Communication according to Adeboye (1990) is the vehicle to mobilize, motivate, inform, educate and persuade the citizenry. It is the vehicle used by policy planners and implementers to reach vast majority of people with development messages. However, Moemeka (1990) points out that past efforts at using the media to promote development had been unsuccessful because of the way the media were used. He stated that: In spite of the considerable effort made by many developing countries, about half of their citizens, children and adults alike are without a minimum level of education... the basic reason for this unlimited success of the mass media in development activities in developing societies lies in the way the media are used.

Majority of third world countries adopt the development media theory as a theoretical base for using the media in development. This theory principally proposes that the media should be used mainly to bring about development. It perceives media as companions of government, and therefore should accept to carry out positive development tasks with nationally established policy. This theory also believes that the media should be controlled or directed in line with economic and political development. This has been the reason most governments in Africa and elsewhere in third world, spend huge money to establish and run the media.

Unfortunately the media, as Jefkins and Ugboajah (1986) have pointed out, have not been put to use for development purposes. They are rather principally utilized as propaganda tools of the ruling elites. The contents of the media, Opubor (1985) has observed is irrelevant to the wishes and aspirations of majority of people in developing countries. Akpan (1987) also states that they are merely the extension of the faces and voices of those in power. Therefore, we are yet to utilize the media for positive development goals.

**The National Population Project**

Nigeria's population project has a long chequered history. Right from the onset, it has been dogged in controversy and confusion. The intense political bickering among the component units of the country have resulted in several cancellation of past population results.

There has always been question of which part of Nigeria harbors a greater number of people. The bickering over this is due largely to-the inclusion of population as a factor in resource allocation and sharing. Many of the component units of Nigeria naturally feel that they are short changed when population figures reveal that they are less in number. Politicians, for selfish motives, have always championed the rejection of population result through vigorous media campaign. Too much preoccupation with how many people exist in a particular part of the country at a given time, has robbed the country of the very essence of a good headcount and its benefits to the nation.

**Benefits of a Good Headcount**

The benefits of a good population headcount is not merely to enable us know how many we are. A good headcount is vital to the realization of sustainable development. Sustainable development requires adequate planning for resource generation, exploitation and allocation. The population figures tell us about the gender composition of the citizenry, their age range, occupation, religion, social class, settlement characteristics, the population growth rate,
etc. These figures help development planners to know the number of people to allocate resources. It helps planning in other sectors of the economy. For example, the population figures help in the planning and allocation of resources to education, health, transportation, urban planning, job creation, housing, etc.

In education for example, the figures help planners to know the enrollment levels in various tiers of our education system in order to allocate financial and social amenities to those areas of critical need.

It is also vital in planning future elections, particularly in creation of constituencies and electoral wards. Government needs these figures to plan adequately for the provision of social amenities. Questions like what our population growth rate is like, birthrate, death rate, infant mortality rate, etc are satisfactorily answered in a successful and credible population project. These are aspects of our population project which the media should promote, by informing, educating and mobilizing the people.

Media Assessment for the Population Project

Moemeka (1990) has advocated that development planners should identify and choose the right medium or media for specific development projects. This is necessary to ensure that the right medium convaxes the right messages to the people. It will also ensure necessary feedback from the receivers. He stated further that:

In an integrated approach to rural development, the issue should not be determining the right medium to use, but rather ascertaining which medium is best suited for what assignment and at what levels of the project.

Equally, Mboho (1991) has lamented the under utilization of the media in our development planning. He believes that a major problem is the question of choice of what medium or media used to reach, majority of Nigerians with development messages. He said this question remains relevant because many policy makers hardly bother about how communication media can be effectively utilized to ensure rapid information diffusion and dissemination. There is need therefore to assess the strength and weakness of available communication media in promoting population activities.

According to Moemeka (I 990) the three most popular media are radio, television, newspaper and newsmagazines. We must however add to this list the internet which is assessed by a growing number of people including Nigerians.

Radio

Radio is reputed to be the most popular medium of mass communication. The reasons for this popularity are not farfetched. Radio is relatively cheaper and easier to maintain. It has immediacy because it can convey information and data much faster. Radio is ubiquitous. It has been miniaturized to allow for portability. Radio can reach vast populations with development messages. This is why UNESCO (cited by Moemeka. 1991) acknowledged that radio when skillfully used, has proved to be the most effective medium of communication in far flung areas: Moemeka (1991) adds that radio beats distances. literacy Carriers and demands minimal know-how to operate the sets. Radio demonstrates flexibility in programming as scheduled programmes can be dropped at short notice.

Those strengths position radio as a good medium to take messages on population activities to people in urban and rural areas. Udoakakah (1991) states that this can be done through news presentation, discussions, programmes in local languages, talk shows, quiz programmes and drama. With these programme types and designs, our population project handlers can tackle the problems of apathy and misconceptions concerning perceived use of population census solely for taxation. Radio can be used effectively to mobilize and sensitize the citizenry for greater participation in population activities.

However, the much acclaimed confidence on the popularity of radio does not remove the fact that it is an audio - only medium lacking the visual impact characterized in television and newspapers. For example, one cannot demonstrate in logical terms the use and benefits of the population project.

Apart from this, many of our rural and most urban residents lack stable power supply to allow for operation of radio sets. The best bet is the use of dry cell batteries, which are already becoming relatively too expensive to afford due to upward increase of the price of these items.

Television

Television combines sight and sound. This allows the communicator to demonstrate to his audience key aspects of his message. Television can bring events live and generate empathy from the viewers. It has immediacy. It is audio-visual as viewers can see and hear at the same time. Television can be used effectively to teach, instruct and explain. Key aspects of a development project can be dramatized for viewers to see. That way, they are convinced instantly.

Unfortunately, television is still an urban phenomenon in Nigeria. There is increasing cost of television sets and low transmitter range of coverage. The contents of television are dominated by urban affairs which reflect largely the
views and aspirations of the ruling elite. Many commercial television stations dwell mostly on the entertainment needs of urban youths. Another problem is the urban orientation of television programme producers. They tend to lack the drive to create programmes of value to the rural majority. Access to television is constrained by inadequate electricity, poor infrastructure and low coverage of relevant topics. Until recently, television ownership in Nigeria tend to be elitist due largely to availability of infrastructure and purchasing power.

**Newspaper**

It can be read and re-read it a later date. Thus allowing for fuller understanding of message contents. It can be stored for future use. Readers can grasp the full explanation in development terms and the benefits of population headcount. This strength is unique in comparison to radio and television messages which are transient.

However, newspaper is an urban phenomenon restricted to the educated urban residents. With the country grappling with a high rate of illiteracy, newspapers may not be as powerful as television in mobilizing the rural elites. Nevertheless, government can encourage the establishment of rural newspapers that will be published in vernacular for the purpose of a wider reach to the rural dwellers.

**Traditional Media**

Traditional media according to Akpabio (2003) are a process and system which utilize symbols, values and institutions which directly appeal and readily connect with the people and thus enhance the variety and effectiveness of messages that circulate in the community.

They are predominantly interpersonal-based media which are a product of our indigenous culture. Wilson (1997) outlines their strengths to include believability, credibility, authoritativeness, dynamism and transactional. They are not affected by the burden of complex bureaucracy which inhibits the operation of the modern media.

Unfortunately, the traditional media have continued to be neglected and unrecognized as credible vehicle for communicating sustainable development. This is rather unfortunate as Wilson(1997) and Moemeka (1991) have pointed out the danger in such neglect. Moemeka, for instance, argues that "any communication strategy which completely ignores traditional media cannot successfully win and retain the people's attention for long. Any communication message that underlies the context in which the people communicate, cannot produce the attitude and behavior changes necessary for rural development'.

Traditional media are suited for mobilization of the majority of rural people for development initiatives. They can be combined with modern media to create effective development messages. They are particularly good in persuading rural folks to participate in the population project because they allow for two-way communication. Despite this however, they lack the strength of universality and immediacy.

**Strategies for Effective Use of the Media for Population. Project**

The media need to be recognized as an important vehicle for promoting the population project. The strength of the media does not end at informing and educating people. They can also be used to mobilize people effectively. Television is a powerful medium with great potentials for persuasion. Television drama, documentaries and feature films can make a lot of difference. Other media are equally important and unique in many respects. Radio is ubiquitous while newspaper and magazines are relatively permanent. They give room for use and consultation.

However, it is important that they are given clear and specific roles to play. The strength of each medium should be aligned with the nature or the type of message to be communicated. Moreover, the need of the audience for a particular medium should be known in order to reach them effectively. There is the need for policy participatory media as a basis for mobilizing people for the population project.

Sobawale (1989) has acknowledged that the media have the responsibility of acquainting the citizens with well defined national goals by informing them of their role, expectations and obligations. The media are expected to link people with government and ensure meaningful participation in very important programmes such as the population project. To do this effectively, they have to tackle and help to overcome the following problems as recommended below.

**Recommendations**

Attempts should be made to overcome the chronic urban orientation of the media personnel by encouraging them to pay more attention to rural affairs. Certainly, there is something worthy of reporting in the rural and sub-urban Nigeria. Most rural dwellers have greater incidence of epidemics, hunger, diseases, poverty etc.

Media contents should reflect the concerns and achievements of the rural majority who should be the target of development messages like the population project.

There is an urgent need for government to break the monopoly of existing broadcasting stations who are burdened by rigid structure and centralization. There should be urgent need to encourage the emergence of community based radio stations or grassroots broadcasting outlets similar to community stations in South Africa. Moreover, the urban broadcasting stations should establish development campaign desks alongside rural sub-urban desks with a corps of
reporters to service the information needs of such areas. Television community viewing center should be resuscitated immediately and expanded to reach greater number of rural communities.

The media should be assigned specific task in good time in the overall national population project implementation.

There is the need for media organization to train more personnel especially in development campaign planning or development communication generally. This can be done through linkage with training institutions within the country. Seminar And conferences need to be organized for this purpose.

The media should focus their attention to fighting illiteracy and dilapidated equipment which restrict access to the target audience.

Sobawale (1989) has mentioned that increasing the real income level of most Nigerians, will go a long way to promoting access and less access means a small number of Nigerians will be available to be mobilized on the population project.

In promoting the national population project, media managers should be involved from the conception stage to enable them fashion the appropriate medium/media for appropriate messages. They need to be carried along for better result to be achieved.

A successful population project mobilization will require the marriage of indigenous and modern media systems. The timing of such exercise and likely benefits should be the concern of communication scholars who should be drafted to assist in the population project campaign.

There is need for a stable policy framework for use of media to support specific development programmes. Such a framework should not limit itself to broad outlines but should also outline specific achievable ways media can be utilized for national development campaigns.

Conclusion
The National Population Project requires sustained possibly long term planning, not a sudden realization that the media have a role to play in its success. The paper has highlighted the strength and weaknesses of the major media systems and has suggested ways the media can be used to promote the population project. Sobawale has stated that while society expects the media to discharge certain responsibilities, the society in turn should create the enabling environment by giving the media the wherewithal to discharge these responsibilities effectively.

Media and government are no doubt partners in progress. There is need for mutual confidence and symbiotic relationship. Government should adequately fund the media, which in turn should give positive publicity to-government policies and programmes. This harmonious relationship will bring about the much cherished and desired success in governance especially during the all-important National Population Headcount originally scheduled for Nov/Dec. 2005 but later slated for March 2006.

References


