

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The emphasis of different national governments, as well as the United Nations Organization has been on the introduction of a fertile ground that would breed sustainable development in our nation states. This was prompted by poor standard of living, characterized by hunger and starvation, diseases, illiteracy, high mortality rate, lack of good water supply, etc. commonly found in many nations, especially developing ones. Meaningful development cannot take place without the full involvement of these nations and their poor and illiterate masses. The masses, the majority of whom are farmers, can only be persuaded to pursue lasting agricultural development through effective communication. This paper, therefore, is geared towards exploring the roles of effective communication in entrenching sustainable development in our nations, and since a good percentage of Nigerians are farmers, it will focus on promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

The emphasis of different national governments, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations and its specialized agents like the World Bank, UNDP and UNEP, has been on the introduction and maintenance of fertile ground that would enable sustainable development to thrive in our nation states. Previously, this emphasis had been on development. The development of a nation refers to her ability to provide good roads, adequate water supply, hospitals, medicine, food, electricity, markets, schools, motor parks, recreation parks, modern industries and other public services for her citizens. A country that has these things put in place is said to be developed. Many western nations are developed, but African, Asian and South American countries are tagged developing countries. Such countries are characterized by hunger and starvation, outbreak of diseases, illiteracy, high mortality rate, lack of good drinking water, poverty and ultimately, death. Today, the world is concerned with sustainable development. What then is sustainable development?

The Concept of Sustainable Development

Goldin and Winters, in Goldin and Winters (Ed.) (1995:1) noted that sustainable development is often defined as “development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”. Suffice it to say that in this concept of development, attention is not only paid to the growth and development of the present generation but also to how to make developmental processes fruitful and at the same time, safe for the future generations of people. Any developmental policy that jeopardizes the effort of future generations to live safely is not sustainable, and should be checked. The Commonwealth Secretariat publication (1999: 4) pointed out that “.....the essence of Sustainable Development is to keep choices open for future generations”. The developed or industrialized nations pursued and are yet pursuing developmental practices that are detrimental to the continued existence of life on earth by way of their industrialization. The Guinness Encyclopedia (1995:300) supported this claim thus, “the source of the environmental problems of today lies in the lifestyle of the industrialized nations.” Much damage has already been done to the environment, and this

calls for immediate redress. The connotation of this is that developing countries should not follow the damaging practices of the developed countries else, there will be disaster within decades. In other words, sustainability should be the watchword in pursuing the development of the developing countries. What the present degree of environmental degradation calls for is not suspending or reversing development strategies in the world, as this will breed poverty among nations especially developing ones, rather, it calls for caution in selecting strategies that are environment friendly, and at the same time yield economic benefits. For these strategies to be fruitful, they must be properly communicated to the citizenry. At this juncture, we shall pause to highlight what communication is about.

The Concept of Communication

The term communication was derived from the Latin word, 'communicare', which means 'to share'. Communication emerged as a separate field when teachers of speech broke away from a larger group of teachers of English in 1914. Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth and Harter (2003:10) defined communication "as the process by which meaning is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs and behaviour". Also, Hybel and Weaver II (6) saw communication as "..... any process in which people share information, ideas and feeling". These definitions portray communication as a process of sharing ideas/ information message involving a sender who encodes a message and a receiver who decodes the message. The ability to communicate is a basic necessity of life for man since he is a social being and needs to interact with other members of his society. To communicate, therefore means that our actions affect the behaviour of another person or group of persons. Mc Arthur (1996:220) pointed out that communication is "a fundamental concept in the study of behaviour, whether by humans, animals, or machine that acts as a frame of reference for language". It involves exchange of meaning which can only be projected through language. Understanding the meaning of another person's message cannot take place unless the communicators are able to arrive at the same meaning for words, phrases and non verbal codes. So, communication is said to have taken place when the information sent is the same as the information received. Human communication can be broken down into two main levels, namely verbal and non verbal.

In verbal communication, words are used as symbols for the exchange of ideas. It is usually associated with structural rule systems. Verbal communication can be further subdivided into oral-auditory communication (spoken language) and visual- graphical communication (written, gestural, and pictographic languages). So, language can take the form of words (spoken, written and sign languages), body language, or any other thing that can add meaning to a message. Gestural/ sign languages, examples, American Sign Language, Signing Exact English are verbal because they involve the use of words produced as gestures rather than as oral sounds. Rebus symbols are good examples of pictorial languages. On the other hand, non verbal communication refers to non verbal features that always accompany spoken languages to enhance the overall meaning of the entire utterance. They include: maintaining or avoiding eye contacts, a wink, a smile, a touch, etc that can communicate with or without the use of words. Non verbal communication is much less structured and is often referred to as extra linguistic variables.

Elements of Communication

The key elements of any communication situation include:

- (a) **People:** In human communication, people perform two roles. They serve as the **senders** and the **receivers** of messages. The sender is the source, originator or initiator of the message, while the receiver is the destination or the target of the message. The sender encodes message while the receiver decodes it. Communication is not a one way process; it involves sending and receiving message simultaneously and continually. It is worthy to note here that people's experiences shape the way they encode and decode messages.
- (b) **The Message:** This is the content of the speech. It includes both the verbal and non verbal components of your speech.

- (c) **The Channel:** It refers to the means through which messages reach the receiver. Messages can reach him through air waves, sound waves, glass fibers and cables, twisted copper etc. This movement of message through the channels involves the five senses of man – hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching. For example, radio messages get to their target through sound waves, which have to do with the sense of hearing.
- (d) **Feedback:** Feedback refers to the verbal and non verbal response of the receiver that shows whether communication has taken place or not. It enables the speaker to know when communication is actually taking place between him and the receiver and when it is not. When ~~the communicator discovers that no communication has taken place between him and his audience, especially where the audience is not so many, he finds an alternative way of making his speech clearer.~~ *Academic Excellence*
- (e) **Noise:** This is a very important variable of the communication process. It refers to any interference, internally or externally, in the process of communication that may affect the clarity of the message. Noise is said to be internal when it comes from the content of the communication itself, and external when there is distraction coming from the environment. When noise is not taken care of in communication, it clogs the communication process.

Types of Communication: -

The communication situations we encounter in society are divided into the following types:

- (i) **Intrapersonal:** This type of communication takes place within self, and takes the form of thoughts and feelings which constitute the message. This message goes through the brain (the channel) for interpretation.
- (ii) **Interpersonal:** An Interpersonal communication takes place between two individuals that have come to discuss on one on one basis.
- (iii) **Small Group:** It is the communication that takes place between a small number of people that have come together to discuss certain issues. Participation in this type of communication is expected to be effective since the number of people involved is small.
- (iv) **Public communication:** Here, one person takes it upon himself to address a large number of people on a face to face basis. He talks while others listen. Consequently, he takes his time to make his speech a success .A good example of public speech is public lecture.
- (v) **Mass communication:** Mass communication involves the use of electronic and print technologies to send message across to millions of people simultaneously. Mass communication messages are rendered in simple language, as the audience may not have access to the broadcaster to ask questions on issues that are not clear to them.

Effective Communication

“Whether you are a doctor, an engineer, an accountant, or a wild fire biologist, if you wish to succeed in business, industry, government, or research, you will need to be able to communicate effectively” (Keene 1987: 7). Communication is effective when the speaker’s communication message makes the desired impact on the receiver. That is, when the message of the speaker meets its target. If it is intended to convey information, it is better done clearly and quickly. If it is to persuade, it is capable of making the receiver follow the speaker’s line of reasoning willingly. One achieves communication competence or effective communication when one has the ability to effectively exchange meaning

through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour. Once this target is not met, communication has failed. In the words of McLaughlin:

All too often we are most aware of the social significance of communication when there has been a communication breakdown. Children might throw tantrums when their needs are not understood. An uncomfortable silence occurs when two friends fail to understand each other. Major tragedies follow when emergency warnings fail to reach people in the path of impending natural disasters. When communication fails, we appreciate its value to individuals and society at large. (1998: 4)

Knowledge, they say, is power. So, when there is a breakdown in communication the speaker must devise an alternative means of resending his message. Without effective communication no society can thrive and no form of development can take place. It should be pointed out here that there would be no meaningful development in a nation if the grassroots are not involved. They must be convinced on the need to join hands with the governments to promote sustainable development by accepting and practicing policies that are friendly to the environment and relegating harmful ones to the background. These can only be achieved through effective communication. With the present hue and cry about environmental degradation, there is the need to promote effective communication between the government or her agencies and the populace on the policies aimed at entrenching sustainable development in our nations.

Common Agricultural Practices

Agriculture is often seen as the oldest industry in the world since living things cannot do without feeding and all the peoples of the world depend on agriculture for food. The main divisions of agriculture are soil science, crop science, animal science, and agricultural economics. The Common agricultural practices that will be discussed here include:

Irrigation: It is a science of artificial application of water to the soil to assist in the growing of agricultural crops in dry areas and during periods of inadequate rainfall. Suffice it to say that irrigation is essential when natural rain is insufficient to support crops. A large expanse of the world's arable land is used for irrigation because most crop producers do not rely on direct rainfall as the main source of water for their plants since it is grossly inadequate. Many nations, especially populous ones like India and Pakistan, get about half of their food supplies through the irrigation methods. Irrigation is practiced in different capacities the world over, but, it does not pass without some consequences. It has been observed that irrigated soil in most cases, perform below its natural potentials mainly due to poor management and poor design (at the outset). This is mainly associated with surface irrigation (a wide range of irrigation ~~Academic Excellence~~ water is distributed over the field by over land flow) especially as many farms are not graded to provide a level surface. Farms located on lower lands with heavier soils are threatened by soil salinity and water logging, and these affect soil fertility except adequate drainage system is put in place.

Excessive Use of Chemicals: One good way of replacing lost soil nutrients is the use of chemical fertilizers. Wrong or over application of chemical fertilizers and other agrochemicals like fumigants and fungicides on the farms leads to over accumulation of the chemicals on the soil, and this in turn, affects both the plants and the top soil thereby leading to soil degradation.

Unwholesome Practices of Subsistent Farmers: Agriculture in Nigeria is mainly on subsistence level. The sector rests largely in the hands of small-scale, poor and illiterate local farmers in the rural areas. These farmers use outmoded farming implements and old methods and harvest very little from their toil. Many of these farmers plant particular crops, especially non-cover crops, on the same piece of land continuously and do nothing on their own to improve the soil nutrients. This invariably reduces the fertility of the soil. Also, during preparation for cultivation, some farmers embark on massive deforestation which in turn, exposes the top soil to erosion gradually. It has been established that one of the major ways of checking soil erosion is by tree planting as the roots of the trees help to hold the soil firm and non vulnerable to flood while the leaves cushion the effect of the rain on the soil. Again, many

farmers embark on bush burning when they clear their farmland for cultivation. Bush burning contributes to global warming which has some dangerous effects on the atmosphere.

Production of Livestock: Livestock production is also done on subsistence basis in Nigeria. Many farmers are ignorant of how best to care for their livestock for maximum benefits. Many of the farmers also rear species without any special feature or advantage instead of exotic species that will fetch them more profits. Meanwhile, heavy grazing reduces vegetation and this in addition to the pressure the hoofs of animals exert on the top soil lead to soil erosion.

Tillage: Another agricultural practice that is worth mentioning is tillage. Tillage is the agricultural preparation of the soil by digging, overturning etc. by such crude methods as hoeing, shoveling, raking, picking, or by the mechanized methods of ploughing, harrowing, etc. These agitations to the soil, especially ploughing make the soil to lose a lot of nutrients, reduce organic matters in the soil, and cause soil erosion.

Water: Untreated animal and human sewage are discharged into rivers and lakes which in most cases, serve as the only source of water supply to homes and many small scale farmers who embark on irrigation farming of vegetables, mainly during dry seasons. Untreated sewage introduces water borne disease pathogens into water and these easily find their way into the human body because of little lax in personal hygiene. Also, poisonous heavy metals from industrial wastes when discharged into water, accumulate in ~~Effective Communication: A Tool for~~ are later ingested by man. All these pollutions cause all manner of diseases. Also, industrial wastes and agricultural runoffs together introduce high rate of algae and bacterial growth which causes oxygen depletion, and eventually, death of aquatic lives.

Making Agricultural Practices Sustainable

Sustainable agricultural practices are those agricultural activities targeted at meeting the need of consumers without compromising the ability of future generations of people to meet their own needs. Agricultural practices that are not sustainable are those that can cause long term damage to the soil and the atmosphere. For instance, erosion is a major threat to the earth surface and it has been established that agricultural practices like deforestation, non planting of cover-crops, excessive tillage, over grazing cause erosion. These practices if not well censored could heighten the rate at which erosion is ravaging the earth surface in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular. Recently, practice has shown that crop varieties which can tolerate packed soil can be planted without any form of tillage through the use of herbicides to control weeds. Anikwe (2006:84) maintained that “herbicides and foliar insecticides applied at recommended rates have small impact on soil organism” and are less likely to cause soil degradation. Erosion threats on earth surface should be checked by planting of trees and cover crops since it has been established that grasses and natural vegetation are most effective in controlling erosion. Erosion sites that have gone beyond the stage of tree planting should be urgently checked by the government. Also, worthy of consideration are agricultural activities that tamper with soil fertility. For instance, irrigation causes water logging and soil salinity if adequate drainage system is not designed. Both water logging and soil salinity lead to soil degradation. The use of potassium fertilizer can also cause soil salinity. Meanwhile, potassium is a common component of chemical fertilizer used by Nigerian farmers. In addition to this, excessive use of fungicides and fumigants lead to soil degradation by attacking soil organisms. Practices that alter soil properties are not sustainable at all and should be checked.

Furthermore, bush burning should be out rightly discouraged owing to its negative influence on the atmosphere. Sewage and other industrial wastes should be properly disposed to avoid contamination with water which is very vital to man. Such contaminations could lead to life- threatening diseases in man and death of aquatic animals. These directly or indirectly do not encourage sustainable development.

The Role of Effective Communication in Making Agricultural Practices Sustainable

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Agricultural development, generally, can only be attained in Nigeria if government pays adequate attention to it. One of the areas of Agriculture that needs attention in this country is information. A good percentage of Nigerian farmers are illiterate, poor and ignorant rural dwellers. Those of them that are commercial farmers are more of businessmen who have embarked on agriculture because they have enough resources to undertake the venture and not that they are versatile in the field. This makes it imperative that governmental agencies can only communicate necessary information as well as packages meant to better their life and promote productivity by beefing up communication. Effective communication is essential since no developmental project can succeed without the involvement of the masses. They need to know why they must pursue agricultural practices that will not only be beneficial to them but will also permit future generations to meet their own agricultural demands. They need to know why it is pertinent that they must pursue sustainable agricultural practices now. They also need to understand and partake in one way or the other, of the various policies and programmes aimed at attaining sustainable agricultural development. The onus lies on agricultural extension workers to provide the much needed information to farmers. The vital messages the farmers need to pursue practices aimed at promoting sustaining agricultural practices are disseminated by extension workers. It is their duty to create learning situations like refresher courses, seminars and symposia as well as organize farmer groups where they gather to share experiences in different parts of the country. Agricultural extension workers are experts that represent the government and are trained to provide expertise information to farmers. In other words, interpersonal, small group and public communications should all be utilized to ensure that farmers get the information they require to promote sustainable agricultural practices. Since the participants in these communication situations are physically present, the sender must always ensure the feedback is satisfactory as this is the only way to ascertain that the receiver has got the right signal. If the feedback is low, he should rephrase his message and if possible, try to reach the receivers in their own native language, pidgin or the language of the immediate environment considering that the majority of them are illiterates. The sender must strengthen his message with illustrations, visual aids, statistics, and other things that will render credibility to his speech. The setting must be acceptable to the participants and noise must not be allowed to clog the communication process. Mass communication should also be employed to complement the other types of communications mentioned above though many of the farmers have limited access to it due to poverty. Radio and television programmes aimed at educating farmers should be well packaged as there is no room for them to ask questions and the presenter has no means of reading their feedback. Also, detailed information on how to achieve sustainability in agriculture should be published in newspapers, magazines and journals for the consumption of farmers who are literate enough to read them.

Summary

Development is an essential attribute of any society but it must tow the path of sustainability. Many developmental programmes carried out in the world today have already caused much damage to the environment and should not be allowed to continue. The implication of this is that safe developmental policies should be aimed at, especially in the pursuit of development in the third world countries. Since sustainable agricultural development can only take place if the masses, the majority of whom are farmers, participate effectively in the developmental programmes, there is a great need for government and its agents to employ effective means of disseminating useful information to them.

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