

USING COMMUNICATION TO DEVELOP AFRICA: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

It is not in dispute that history has no life of its own; living and future generations must breathe life into it and relive it if it is to be useful. This is our clarion call today. Unless we use our knowledge in advancing humanity, we will not be doing any justice to the “history makers.” No doubt, this summons professionals to a higher responsibility in setting out the development agenda.

Whereas most of Africa's problems lie in the use, and management of tangible resources, part of the problem remains the underutilization of communication and dissemination of knowledge. And knowledge, it has been said, is power. It cannot be gainsaid that the possession, transfer and use of knowledge are essential determinants of development. Information, the communicable form of knowledge has come to be recognized, therefore, as a major condition for socio-economic and political development. It is an indispensable factor in the rational use of natural resources, scientific and technological advancement, and progress in agriculture, industry and services.

Consequently, absorption of scientific and technological transfer of information is an essential condition for advancement in developing countries. Africa has a challenge to harness the potential of information and communication to promote the development goals declared by individual member states, namely, eradication of poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS among other persistent maladies. The 21st century belongs to Africa.



While Africa has had many challenges, the contribution of African heroes and heroines to humanity is just one example of Africa's potential. Their achievements flowed from the principles of liberty, democracy, human rights and equality. It is their belief in fairness and justice that led to the fight for human rights and human dignity in the continent and the world at large. Because of the ideals of Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral, Modibo Keita, Patrice Lumumba, to mention a few, the African socio-political landscape has never been the same again.

Despite these contributions and advances, the development of the continent still remains a great challenge. Africa still remains bedeviled with problems such as hunger, poverty, disease and ignorance. In the meantime, vices such as corruption and bad governance have overrun most countries, occasioning great suffering. But is this the end to everything or is there a way out of this? Certainly, yes! In tackling these problems, African societies have resorted to different methodologies. These have ranged from large-scale political and economic reforms, constitutional reforms and, in some cases, resort to non-specific means of resolving intractable problems.

This contribution proceeds from the following premise: communication is a critical component of the development process. The use of information communication technologies (ICT) as tools of communication has an immense impact on advancement in the African continent.

COMMUNICATION IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Communication in Africa is categorized into rural and urban forms. Given that the urban is largely associated with Western influences and rural communication being largely oral, with immediate feedback; any modern communication channel should, therefore, take this into consideration. The hypothesis is that African societies have strong and enduring socio-cultural influences and will, therefore, embrace technology that promotes greater interaction and sustains kinship. Based on this premise, any modern communicator should take this into consideration in accessing the impact that the message communicated would have on the world as a whole and on the individual about whom such communication is being made!



While much of the debate around communication and development has centred on national planning problems, it is now emerging that recent trends have swung the pendulum back towards capacity building among individuals and groups, to engage in productive actions for development. It is relatively easy to access information about aggregate medium use, but it is extremely difficult to gather a sense of what information and knowledge mean for the poor (who are likely to be on the receiving end of communication strategies).

The problem is certainly complex. Let me just explain with one aspect of communication: languages. A cursory look at contemporary African literary efforts to address the language question illustrates the depth of the problem for Africans. Take, for instance, the post-independence constitutions. One would have expected that the native tongues of the people would be used to facilitate relationships among citizens, and in their interaction with the constitutions. But on the attainment of independence, most African states adopted constitutions whose language was alien to the ordinary people.

Thus, by not speaking the language of the indigenous peoples, these constitutions alienated the ordinary people with the result that they became strangers to the constitutional process. This may be said of many other aspects of the people's daily lives. The point being made here on the language adopted in the constitutions has drawn on published research by Burton (1994; 1996; 1998). (See Simon Burton, *Development Communication: Towards a Social Action Perspective*).

Bureaucracies are incompatible with indigenous expectations and attitudes. Perhaps it would be relevant at this point to pose the question: Has communication been used to empower or disempower the people?

Communication – for Empowerment or Disempowerment?

From my illustration of the language of most African constitutions, it is clear that whereas communication is an empowering tool, it can also be a tool of disempowerment by generating dependence and intimidation because of its power, complexity, or inaccessibility. What about



the flow, ambiguity, and inaccuracy of information? How will a person who is not trained to read and process written material feel when he or she is bombarded with information? How can an individual, for instance, be insulated from manipulation through strategic propaganda?

It is comforting, however, that communication is a key factor in empowerment strategies. Engagement in the communication web broadens one's perspective, opens possibilities and allows coordination. The process of taking action cannot only be the sole responsibility of the affected community. In a coordinated community empowerment strategy, there must be communicators providing people with access to production and management and also producing and managing themselves. The community can facilitate the communicators' understanding of the problems and the dimensions of the problem; whereas the communicators can publicize it and connect the people. As practitioners in public relations, we must act in this direction to promote changes around us. A united front must be formed to break the gaps that communication is creating. The rights for free access to media must be defended and recovered. The community and professionals must both be significant actors in this process. It is important to be connected. It is also important to generate creative and efficient strategies.

ICT and the Social Processes

In the recent past, there has been a re-conceptualization of the human development process, which now focuses on enlarging people's choice and, by logical inference, alleviating poverty. One result of this change in focus is that the eradication of poverty has become a multi-dimensional activity. Poverty, considered to be more than a lack of material well-being, also reflects poor health and education, deprivation in knowledge and communication, inability to exercise human and political rights and the absence of dignity, confidence and self-respect. Human development implies that people's capabilities are enhanced and their lives enriched. This is achieved by expanding human capabilities. At all levels of development, the three essential ingredients for human development are for people to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable and to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living.

The essential features of human development are:

- Equity in access to and distribution of resources and capabilities;
- Sustainability of resources and institutions;



- Acquisition and distribution of knowledge; and
- Equal participation of all.

It would seem logical to conclude that better access to a resource as basic as information would greatly improve standards of living. Lack of information translates to ignorance, which is the incubator of poverty, disease and underdevelopment. Communication, therefore, presents a tool for human advancement, structured in different sectors. The idea is that communication builds and maintains relationships through which duties and rights are allocated and enjoyed. At the political level, communication is a tool in national planning and poverty eradication.

ICT for Development and Poverty Alleviation

Today, there is considerable agreement that communication is important for development. Perhaps the gathering together of PR professionals translates to the best example of what communication can do – facilitate the assembly of public relations practitioners from Africa and all over the world at the touch of a button. Noting the importance of ICT, most states and organizations are now promoting and supporting the creation of an infrastructure that would make ICT available on an affordable basis to everybody. ICT plays a prominent role in this broader conception of poverty. They provide important tools for the improvement of health and education, offer new channels for the diffusion of knowledge and create physical and virtual spaces for social communication. This human approach does not ignore the importance of economic growth and productivity, but addresses the question of how economic performance relates to human empowerment and thus asks whether such growth is equitable and sustainable.

Up till early 2002, much advocacy effort surrounding ICTs related to building or strengthening the digital readiness of developing nations to help people get connected. For example, the principal response to the “digital divide” between Africa and the West has been to make available computers, telecommunications links, and Internet Service Providers where these facilities were thinly spread or absent completely. Nevertheless, the fact remains that these ICTs have not spread as they ought to. It is no surprise that the most Africans have not used these, let alone have adequate knowledge of them. The non-use of ICT services by the targeted local population is due to the lack of understandable and relevant content. Now we are beginning to see how increasing attention is being paid to the content and services that ICT



can deliver – digital communication (email), portals for health and development, and services identified as e-Commerce, e-Governance, e-Banking, e-Agriculture, e-Health, e-Learning and e-Many Somethings.

The world seems to be in agreement that quality information disseminated widely contributes to development, and ICT expand the reach and impact of that information. There is also a consensus on the potential of ICT to promote economic growth, combat poverty, and facilitate the integration of developing countries into the global economy. Seizing the opportunities of the digital revolution is one of the most pressing challenges we face.

Among the many challenges to turning these assumptions into reality is providing communities with convenient access to ICT and ensuring that information and communication services are relevant, localized, understandable, and affordable. In many countries the answer has been provided through a variety of public ICT facilities which make access possible because of the more affordable cost associated with sharing as compared to individual ownership of ICT and individual network use fees.

The June 2002 meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in New York culminated in a series of major international forums focusing on the need to make information and communication technologies (ICTs) available to all nations, especially for the development and alleviation of poverty.

Another problem is that ICT deployment and economic growth have a dialectical relationship so that there are no unilateral causal links. Economic growth may be partly the result of the growth in the use of ICT, but then the proliferation of ICT is itself dependent upon the availability of economic resources. If the definition of development is extended beyond mere economics and growth, the assessment is complicated even further. A further complication for a full global assessment is that most of the developing countries still have to begin the process of harnessing ICTs to their development goals. The reality of the widening gap in digital capacity raises the serious concern that the poorer countries may not be able to overcome the financial and technical obstacles now limiting their access to the digital technologies. The



concern about the ICT gap inspired many public and private donor institutions to propose plans for the elimination of digital disparity. Herein lies the role of public relations in ensuring that communication does not just remain a medium, but also a tool for development.

Role of Public Relations in Communication

The public relations industry is self-regulating and, therefore, faced with the constant challenge of managing the relationships that shape reputation. This being the case, the industry must build confidence and reliability on the information disseminated in furtherance of the development of Africa as a continent. Public relations practitioners should play a major role in achieving positive and effective communication. The public relations industry should therefore collate and promote resources and return on investment and identify the best practices adopted by various countries as part of policy formulation and strategic placement within the globe. These best practices should be identified within the areas of:

- Improved business performance;
- Support for achievement of business and policy objectives;
- Strategic risk management;
- Public relations in public sector;
- Effective training in public relations for practitioners and counsellors on how to measure and evaluate public relations effectiveness;
- Building public relations measurement and evaluation components into ongoing communications programmes and activities;
- Allocation and appropriation of funds to support PR evaluation efforts.

CONCLUSION

As tools for development, ICTs present many challenges and opportunities in Africa. Use of the new information and communication technologies certainly offer many substantial benefits to the development process. These include possibilities for creating new jobs in the emerging information-based economy, equitable remote access to resources in support of both distance education and the strengthening of local educational capacity; reduction of communications and administrative costs by building communications networks and development of information systems to address food security issues such as agricultural production, government subsidies for food security, monitoring of water and land resources,



disease problems, food transportation and storage.

But these opportunities also come with challenges. Many of the problems that bedevilled us many decades ago, if not centuries are still with us. Diseases, ignorance and poverty still abound. These challenges are not in any way to paint a grim picture of Africa. I know practitioners want Africa to reach its full potential. In essence, you are giving clear orders that we must move forward and work together for the African renaissance. This is not an impossible dream. The verdict is that we must now think and act radically. We must employ new strategies instead of duplicating what has been done before; otherwise we will be going round in cycles. If this is to be found in communication, then as public relations professionals we have a role to play. This supreme aspiration must rule our professional undertakings. We must be willing and daring to go the extra mile.

We need to remind ourselves that history does not long entrust the care of freedom to the timid or the weak. We must also be willing, individually and as a people, to accept whatever sacrifices that may be required of us. The renewal of Africa belongs to this generation. We dare not fail our people, our continent and the generation of African leaders before us.

In conclusion, let me say:

If there are beautiful dreams about Africa, then there are roads that lead to those dreams. Two of these roads could be developmental communication and public relations.

This is the challenge before us today!

