Planning and Executing Grassroot Campaigns Among Women Groups in Nigeria -A Participatory Communication Approach

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ABSTRACT Women often constitute themselves into groups in Nigeria for the purpose of promoting their interests. What this portend for development is that awareness campaigns can be planned and executed using these group leaders through a participatory communication approach which recognizes the integrity of the women in being able to discuss and resolve intelligently their development problems and the strategies that can be adopted to resolve them. This paper takes a look at the role local leaders can play in such development efforts and the need to involve them in the conceptualization, design and organization of campaign messages so as to remove their flaws. The paper identifies the need for training for both campaign organizers and recipients as a pre-requisite for actualizing the participatory development communication approach and recommends the integration of such approach with the establishment of a community based radio station.

INTRODUCTION

Mabogunje in 1981 has postulated that over 70% of Nigerians reside in rural areas. The level of illiteracy of our rural communities is also put at about 90% (Onabajo, 1995).

Campaigns generally are aimed at mobilizing members of a society for educational messages that are likely to lead to development.

Grassroot campaigns are aimed at the rural population that are presuppposed to be lacking certain vital ingredients for rural development. According to Akeredolu-Ale (1993), rural development is aimed at the entire rural sectors even if it entails constituent programmes aimed at particular target groups. It aims at rural transformation and helps to enhance the relationship between the rural and urban sectors of the economy.

The rural population is made up of over 60% women who are actively engaged in one form of subsistence existence or the other and according to Koinyan (1993), campaigns must fulfil the following criteria:

1. That the programme package must take into consideration the view that development is a total package comprising socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic aspects.
2. That rural development is the foundation of national development.
3. That the indices for economic growth have to do with the quality of life and standard of living of the majority who are women and who constitute a significant influence in the upbringing of children.
4. That rural development programmes must be designed for mass grassroots participation.
5. That every effort be made to ensure that all resources allocated to all development programmes be used to achieve maximum effect and in the best interest of the majority.
6. That each and every one of the country's over 100,000 communities can be made a real centre of growth and development.

LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND GRASSROOT CAMPAIGNS

According to Anyanwu (1992), grassroot campaigns rely significantly on local leadership to fire the enthusiasm of the people. Local leaders are the real agents in their communities and other change agents must recognize the pattern and structure of leadership in any community they find themselves. Women are found as leaders of market associations and other skilled labours and they constitute powerful influences in the mass mobilisation of women groups.

According to Wright (1986), local leaders refer to individuals, who through day to day personal contacts, influence others in matters of decision and opinion formation and this is distinct from formal leadership brought about through position of authority. To Wright, the local leaders are more active participants in the communication system, most especially the mass media. In this regard

they tower above members of their communities in access to development infor-mation and they become vital agents of social change and community development.

Leadership in a community depends on the co-operative personal attitudes of individuals within the community and the system of communication in use in a given community. The community is the environment in which a local leader establishes contact with its culture, consolidates her relationships with other people, senses the efforts of others to educate her for leadership and by her own personal efforts improve her leadership ability, through access to the electronic media and other communication channels. Leadership gives common meaning to the common purposes of a local community. It infuses consistency into the subjective aspects of countless decisions in a changing environ-ment and inspires the personal conviction that produces vital cohesiveness, without which understanding and co-operation are impossible.

Local leadership fosters participation in the decisions that affect the lives and welfare of people in the rural communities and creates faith in a number of activities that may lead to rural development.

The relationships among rural people are personal and in most cases, face to face. With close personal relationships, the woman commu-nity leader, according to Anyanwu, is more involved in the day to day activities of her commu-nity and does recognize areas of conflicts better that her urban counterpart.

The local leader must continually be aware that rural development is not an end in itself, but a means to national development. She must be guided by the understanding that the principal purpose for rural development is to bring about desirable changes for better living, among the people of her community. She should help the people to identify the problems militating against their progress, and lead them to a desired action, to solve these problems. The local leader should ensure that the rural population is involved in the planning, execution, utilization and assessment of any project designed to improve their welfare.

FLAWS IN CAMPAIGN MESSAGE DESIGN

One major flaw in our attempt at grassroot campaigns is that those who design and send out messages unwittingly alienate those for whom the messages are meant. According to Mogekwu (1990), senders of messages – information officers, news producers, and other government and private personnel responsible for information and message design and dissemination arrogate to themselves a degree of omniscience with regard to the message and information wants and needs of the rural audience.

These message designers and information disseminators tend to belong to a class that does not necessarily share the same frame of reference with the majority of the masses that constitute the target audience, and for whom the messages are meant. Yet, little or no inquiry is made into the nature of the audience before messages are constructed. Usually to save time, or sometimes out of sheer laziness, work is executed on the assumption that the audience is just like the individuals who are constructing the messages. If the message makes sense to them then it should make sense to the audience

This is a very patronizing disposition on the part of those who design and send out mobilization messages. Sometimes one can even identify some elements of condescension in the whole message outfit.

Some of these message designers sincerely believe that ruralites don't even know what they need and that others should think on their behalf and send them "well-packaged" materials. The result is that most of the messages sent out to the masses in an attempt to develop them are more sender-oriented than audience-oriented. This tends to establish the picture of a patron-client relationship that could alienate the audience and render the whole message dissemination exercise futile.

Because sender and receiver are not operating on the same thought frequencies, there is misunderstanding, suspicion and, therefore, distrust and non-acceptance of message content.

Closely related to this patronizing posture of message designers is the non-participation of receivers of messages in the process of infor-mation generation. Usually, news, information or other kinds of messages are products of the amalgamation of several micro events that have been selectively perceived by someone in such a way that they have a meaning for him or her.

Since messages work through their impacts on symbol systems in the receivers, and since they are themselves composed of symbols, the

selection and arrangement of symbols is what will determine the success of a message if it is transmitted to the right receivers (McQuail, 2000).

Urbanites are guided by generally different criteria from ruralites in their selection of meaningful micro-events that constitute information or news. This selection phenomenon plays a major role in message generation. If the rural receivers do not participate in putting together these micro-events, then the eventual product will have little or no relevance for them.

Besides, the urbanites are also usually the actors in events from which the message is designed. That is, they generate the news, the information, and the message. There is then no attraction between the message and the receiver. The important point here is that the message remains urbanized and so has an attraction for an urban audience.

But a much greater percentage of our population is rural. If most of our message content is urbanized, then we are being unfair to the majority of the people. Neglecting such a proportion of the population makes mobilization pretty difficult.

THE NEED FOR TRAINING

Women need to feel valued if they are to have the courage to participate in training. The courage can stem from inclusion in designing, implementing, and evaluating processes of development projects. It is imperative to create an environment of trust, using honest and open communication. Organizations have to be genuinely committed to long-term relationships with communities in order to foster women's trust and create the desire to participate in training. Individual practitioners must have the conceptual knowledge about trust building and acquire necessary interpersonal and organizational communication skills to build trusting relationships.

Development practitioners must see women not only as wives and mothers, but as agricultural producers and heads of households with important informational needs. They must be exposed to gender-sensitive training to expand their personal and professional knowledge of women's roles. In addition, they need to recognize what problems are evident in gender-restricted training. Women prefer to learn in single-gender environments until they have gained the self-confidence necessary to function in mixed-gender groups. Organizations that utilize mixed community meetings to maximize limited staff, should consider this learning preference when initiating projects. Both men and women must be comfortable in early training experiences, and be led into mixed-gender environments carefully, slowly but surely.

As Korten (1990) suggests, networking and collaborative efforts are mandatory for successful programs. Organizations must begin to network more effectively to minimize duplication of efforts, and allow women to actively participate in non-traditional female subjects related to their skills. While organizations can work toward building independence in all participants to ensure project continuity, women must recognize the need to empower and motivate themselves. This is the only insurance for creating independence and project sustainability.

As women become active participants in their personal empowerment, they will acknowledge their individual and collective values. They will recognize their contributions to society, demanding and getting equal access to information and resources. Rural women will not chart their course without risk, but by beginning the ascent to equality, they will gain momentum in reaching their destination. Development organizations must be encouraged to assume a greater role in facilitating this ascent, and supporting women's access to information and resources through programs and government intervention.

THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Participatory communication is a necessary instrument and condition for change to take place. According to Nair and White (1994) participatory development communication is a two-way dynamic interaction which through dialogue transforms grassroots people and enables them to become fully engaged in the process of development which brings about self reliance. Participatory communication requires transactional communication wherein a sender and receiver of messages interact over a period of time to arrive at shared meanings. They discuss their differences in order to arrive at a consensus. The environment for participatory communication is expected to be supportive, creative, consensual, facilitative and should lead to the sharing of ideas through dialogue. The scenario is highly dynamic and transformational. It begins

with the premise that all people have a right to voice out their views and become active partners in the development process. As a human interaction, it is both a process and a product; it is both a means and an end; it is both a right and a need. As a dialogue between power holders and the powerless, it is both empowering and disempowering.

According to Borda (1985), it is good to empower rural women to contribute to their own development by facilitating involvement through catalytic approaches. The ability of an extension-ist to create or destroy independence and self reliance, is a determining factor in whether programmes continue to operate and flourish, after the organization leaves. Facilitating women's ability to solve their own problems and create long lasting solutions to community development, requires time and trust among all participants. Only through a participatory approach that results in commitment, can sustainable development which survives and remains viable after the development organization withdraws, be generated.

CREATING COMMUNITY-BASED MEDIA

The efforts to create community-based radio stations can be seen as attempts to demassify the mass media, to make it possible for people's organizations to provide alternatives to professionally-produced programs, some of which have been imported from outside the local area. Drawing upon her experience working with community media in the Philippines, Rosario-Braid (1989) notes that 'demassified' media have distinct advantages over more traditional mass media for community groups:

¨   They are traditional in the true sense of the word and therefore have strong indigenous linkages.
¨   The content is not commercial and the messages have local flavour.
¨   The content has little, if any, colonial influence.
¨   They utilize appropriate indigenous materials and resources.
¨   They depict the people's actual reality – their ideas, wisdom, tradition, arts, and culture.

The parameters of this process can be found amidst that growing research area called Participatory Development Communication (PDC). Nair and White (1994) frame it within the concept of Cultural Renewal and regard it as a 'process of goal-oriented cultural and structural changes facilitated by pro-active indigenous communication transactions amongst local people within a specific cultural context. The process involves a combination of factors, especially those involving how people respond to time, space, themselves, their culture, and their environment. As applied to radio broadcasting, it is a process which brings people into positions of decision-making about what types of program content and styles they need, what works best for their social and cultural environment, and how programs can best be developed for them.

As Hochheimer (1993) suggests, organizing democratic radio means identifying: who serves whom? Is the function of the station its constituent community segments? Or, do the communities act as resources for the station to present to society as a whole?

This also means identifying the various segments of the community who are willing and able to participate. Determining the participants and how they will implement the plan is important. Given the varying political interests that exist in any community, the determination of who gets to play in the game and which interests they represent, will no doubt influence outcomes.

These decisions become acute when deter-mining who speaks for whom. Women, especially, have traditionally been relegated to secondary positions and their voices rarely heard. They often feel hindered from speaking openly about issues of concern to them. A critical issue, then, is the development of a place within which marginalized groups can develop their own voice and sense of power from the beginning of the planning process.

APPRAISING THE NIGERIAN SCENARIO

It is unfortunate that grassroot campaigns among, women groups in Nigeria have not been properly articulated, despite the fact that women constitute the bedrock of any development. For long, women have played second fiddle to men on all fronts. Culturally, women are believed to be inferior to men, but, belief contradicts the res-ponsibilities entrusted on them as the home-makers and the rearers of Nigerian children who are tomorrow's future leaders. Since most development paradigms are family based, there is the need to focus on women groups and use

them as springboards for bringing about development. It is in line with this reality that UNICEF brought into conference last year women groups consisting of market women associations to educate them about immunizing their children against polio infections. Since mobilization campaigns are often multifaceted, UNICEF adopted three strategies to prevent polio. Those are (i) Routine immunization (ii) acute flaccid paralysis surveillance and (iii) house to house immunization on national immunization days.

Planning and executing grassroot campaigns especially among women groups involve making use of their leaders to fire the enthusiasm of the people (Anyanwu, 1992; Wright, 1986). UNICEF is aware that awareness has to be created for grassroot campaigns to be effective and local leaders must be used in creating such awareness, hence it has done the following:

i. It has paid advocacy visits to political and traditional rulers.
ii. It has trained town criers who are agents of traditional communication used by traditional rulers to disseminate developmental messages.
iii. Village development committees have been established and trained.
iv. Local government social mobilization committees have been reactivated.

The measures adopted above are also aimed at ensuring that rural community groups are involved in planning and executing mobilization campaigns through a participatory approach.

There is the need to decentralize the mass media, especially radio broadcasting through the establishment of community-based radio stations that will make rural people part of the decision making process that will determine culturally relevant program and how they should be produced and presented to them.

The federal government has embarked on the establishment of semi-urban radio and television stations all over the country and the relevance or otherwise of these stations to grassroot campaigns will soon be ascertained.

CONCLUSION

In order for grassroot campaigns among women groups to be meaningful and goal-centred, there is the need to localize message content, such that messages are processed in a way that they can be appreciated, understood and utilized by the rural audience.

Lack of receiver-oriented messages, patronising disposition of senders of message, lack of synchrony in the frames of reference of senders and receivers of messages, and the distracting nature of most of the media used, should be avoided in message designs for mass grassroot mobilization.

There is a strong need to continuously carry out some inquiry into the nature of the audience for whom messages are meant. The homogeneity of the rural population and the constancy of rural attitude on several issues are assumptions that could be disastrous and detrimental to our message design and dissemination.

Attitudes are not constant across time and issues. Different issues at different times may elicit different attitudes in a people. Even the same issues can generate different reactions from the same audience if such issues come up at different times. Constant monitoring becomes imperative such that messages will become more audience-oriented than sender-oriented. Ruralites know their wants and needs and it is they who should identify them. Having done so, they should then be allowed to participate in the selections of those micro symbols in their environments that can be put together as messages. The biases involved in this selection should be in favour of the ruralites so that their symbol system would be appropriately utilized.

The fact that greater knowledge of the target audience increases the potential impact of the message, no matter what the medium to be used for delivery, is leading more and more policy-makers, donor agency personnel and community workers to the realization that involving members of the target group in the decision-making about message design and delivery will increase the effectiveness of the campaign.

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