

Forging a Link Between Indigenous Communication, Effective Community Social Work Practice and National Development

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ABSTRACT A major impediment to social work practice especially in developing countries is ensuring that citizens in both rural and urban communities benefit from a nation's increased affluence. However, community social work practice is often hampered in those rural areas, lacking prior contact with modernisation and where determining appropriate communication strategies to reach these indigenous dwellers may become a problem. To facilitate effective social work practice directed at enhancing the welfare of indigenous communities, this paper emphasises the need for community social workers to understand the rudiments of indigenous communication. Moreover, this becomes realistic when considered that indigenous people are often favourably disposed to development initiatives when the change advocates have even a minimal understanding of their language, music, cultural and religious beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

When the underlying principles guiding social work practice are understood, then the relevance of indigenous communication to its practice would be vividly deciphered. To begin, I shall focus on or look at some definitions of social work that would explain the profession and its functions. In this wise, Kenneth Pray cited in Smalley (1966) described social work as:

A normal constructive social instrument...a necessary part of the structure of a civilised, well-planned society because it is directed to helping individuals meet the problems of their constantly shifting relations with one another and with the whole society, and to helping the whole society...adjust its demands ...and services [among its members in accordance with the real needs of the individuals that compose and determine its life.

Also, in support of the relevance of social work in a society with a continuous change in the relationship between man and his society or environment, Smalley (1966: 3) attests that:

The central concern of social work is that the relationship should be a progressively productive one for the individuals who make up society, through promotion of their well-being and provision of opportunity for their realisation of potential, and for society as a whole through...development of... institutions, which further such well-being and self-realisation for all its people.

And with immense brevity and lucidity, Karl de Schweinitz describes social work as "the body of knowledge, skill, and ethics, professionally employed in the administration of the social services and in the development of programs for social welfare." To him, these services could assume the form of-health, education, housing, employment, recreation, cultural development human relations and other development initiatives. This notion and the abundant needs to be met must have guided the current demarcation of social work service at least in Nigerian universities into-Medical Social work, Industrial Social work, Social Welfare and Community Development-all in a bid to meet ever changing and diverse human needs in a constantly evolving world.

From the preceding, it is evident that social work depicts that institution that serves other institutions because it recognises a need to initiate those development policies that would enhance man's relationship with his society. In other words, professional social workers are agents of their society, employed to effectively administer social service programmes. Such duties permeate all facets of society-public health, community development, social welfare and industrial relations-and all directed at shaping or changing social service policies to correspond with community patterns of social service programmes as well as relate social policies to development.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Communication has always been an indispensable socio-cultural tool for dispensing information that would boost the political, social, economic, cultural, scientific, educational, technological and agricultural development of any nation.

This paper is not concerned with the everyday or non-professional's view of the communication process or a discussion on what communication is or entails. Nevertheless, I shall dwell briefly on an ideal communication situation before discussing the peculiarities of the indigenous communication channel.

In every communication situation, one thing is essential. This is information. It is only when information is available that a communicator's intention can be encoded or packaged in message form to be transmitted from source (A) through a system or channel to recipient (B) who would decode the message to send a feedback to the originator (or initiator) of the communication process. The channel of message dissemination is important both in sending the message and receiving feedback. When a source sends relevant messages to people, the intention is to affect their actions and decisions, it is necessary that after communication has occurred, the actions of recipients should be monitored to determine to what extent communicated messages have had the desired effect.

Some researchers, Mundy (2000) and Anyaegbunam et al. (1999) cautioned that the appropriate starting point in communication should be RESEARCH-in this case, community (people and environment), channel and message research. For Anyaegbunam et al. (1999), such research should address some key areas that include: gender; culture (religion and beliefs, values, labels, vocabulary and categories used by groups for discussing the issues); socio-economic status (wealth/poverty, class, and caste); occupation; age; educational background; psychographics (fears, hopes, motivating factors, etc); experience; marital status; parenthood; and interests.

In addition, Mundy (2000) believes that communication research in indigenous settings should hinge on some specific areas and questions. These include: Information sources in rural settings; communication channels (how people are entertained, through what media and

on what occasions; economic relations; indigenous organisations); indigenous education (how skills are passed on); sources of indigenous records; messages (topics of interest, purpose of information and channel of dissemination); and receivers (target audience, demographic characteristics).

Similarly, in a quest to disseminate information that would create the desired effect of changing people's opinions and decisions concerning cogent societal issues, individuals have designed and used a diversity of communication channels. Regardless of channels used, communication can have relative success when there is a correlation between channel choice and appropriate audience analysis. More explicitly, Omosa (2000) explains:

To communicate, there should be proper matching of audience, message and medium. The audience to communicate with or to can be identified by looking at the people's awareness of the topic in general; the geographical location; and organisational characteristics of the target group. There is a need to know the people's norms and values, their traditional communications channels, etc, before the introduction and use of a new channel.

From this, it is evident that with technological development, the slow rate with which rural communities accept technological improvement that could enhance their health, economic, agricultural or living standards, could be related to the fact that "preferred" channels of message dissemination are separated from their environments or cultural beliefs. Thus, successful communication channels targeted at indigenous people should be agreeable to a diversity of audiences as they relate to their current perceptions of culture, religion, socio-economic, educational and occupational levels. Hence, the relevance of this paper on indigenous communication channels targeted at indigenous people.

The Communication Process and Indigenous Communication

Indigenous communication channels have always been in existence in communicating at local levels though research in this area has been neglected. On the other hand, research has concentrated on indigenous knowledge probably based on the belief that awareness of how indigenous people behave or implement identified projects would aid in mapping out participatory techniques or communication strategies for selling

modern methods of doing the same thing to them.

This paper seeks to buttress the need to study and build upon indigenous communication channels because of their usefulness in disseminating information on agricultural, health, religion and other issues that would enhance a rural peoples' well being.

THE INDISPENSABLE NATURE OF INDIGENOUS CHANNELS

It is imperative to discuss each of the most commonly used indigenous communication channels identified from research and cite examples where they have been indispensable agents of change for social work professionals. But first, there is a need to identify some basic elements that make indigenous channels so attractive in sending messages at grassroots levels.

- 1) Indigenous communication channels are a blend of the most common traditional media that include music (or more popularly folk music), drama, dance, sign language, drums, and town criers.
- 2) Indigenous media is found indispensable in disseminating information to audiences in rural settings or more specifically folk people.
- 3) Messages disseminated through Indigenous media channels are entertaining, memorable, attractive and more in tune with our cultural ideals.
- 4) Messages disseminated via indigenous channels use methods (songs, drama) that are so attractive and entrancing that people unconsciously find themselves adopting new ideas-related to farming techniques, family planning and health without meaning to.
- 5) Indigenous communication channels are so undisruptive or flexible that message recipients could be engaged in more than one activity at a time. For instance, a farmer could be working on his farm and still receive instructions on new rice cultivation methods. It may appear that indigenous communication channels are structured to meet target recipients at their most accessible periods or places of operation. For instance, mothers are visited in their homes, markets or the village square; children are visited in their schools or homes and fathers in their homes or place of work (rivers for fishermen and farms for farmers and so on).

Music

This is popularly referred to as folk music. This is the most common indigenous method of message dissemination. This is probably because it entails the use of songs that are entertaining, rhythmic, repetitive, easy to follow and memorable.

- 1) Messages passed down via this channel have the most lasting impression because songs are often memorable yet conclusive in imparting the intentions of the message source.
 - 2) Songs are usually in the language of the target audience or a vernacular they are familiar with.
 - 3) When folk music is played, some accidental audience may find the sequence familiar and attractive even when the language is not easily understood. As such, they would become interested in knowing more about the message content. In other words, message disseminated using music in traditional channels are more effective in reaching a wider audience than the message originator intended.
 - 4) Songs abound in their millions in all societies especially at the indigenous level. For instance, most African folklores have accompanying songs that are memorable even when the story has been forgotten. But then, all African songs have a story to tell and a message directed at particular segments of the society or individuals that could be: parents, man, woman, child, farmers, herbalists and so on.
- Omosa (2000) adds that while modern dramas need professionals to work songs into their scripts, at the local level, a story teller tells a story and others build up the story with songs as the scene unfolds.
- 5) Music is essential in traditional settings because most indigenous activities-chieftaincy events, initiation and marriage ceremonies are given life with colourful educative songs. It is for this reason that most development initiatives in the area of social work/community development are re-laid via entertaining music.

Reference may be made to entertaining songs with messages that caution, warn and inform people about family welfare programmes, impending disasters and literacy enhancement

skills respectively. For instance, while on field work placement at the social welfare centre, Iyanganku, Ibadan, Nigeria, the vast number of illiterate female (single parents) clients in their twenties and even below were asked how they became aware of the child welfare services rendered by the agency. While only a few said they were directed by policemen who had become tired of the constant reports made on domestic violence, majority said they got the information via a radio advertisement. Apparently, there was an ongoing advertisement sponsored by the Oyo State Ministry of Social Welfare using the native Yoruba language and attractive lyrics to convey the duties of the social welfare centre in rendering counselling and juvenile court services to troubled families.

In Nigeria, the USAID and a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO), BASICS (2001: 13) joint project on child survival, used the cited song to encourage parents to immunise their children based on the African belief that it is only a child that survives that inherits the parents' wealth:

Omo mi ni o jogun o (My child will inherit)
Aso aran ti mo ra (The beautiful cloth I have)
Omo ni o jogun o (My child will inherit)
Ise owo mi. (My wealth)

Generally, music has been employed by International organisations and NGOs in developing countries to convey information about crucial issues for sustainable development. They include: the need for expectant mothers to attend anti and post natal clinics; for children to be immunised against the five deadly diseases-polio, tetanus, measles, tuberculosis, and whooping cough; enticing children to attend school; benefit of pipe-borne water to good health and; the gains of using modern agricultural methods (Omosa, 2000)

Tales or Folklores

In traditional or indigenous settings, stories abound using animals especially the extremely cunning Mr. Tortoise, the lion and even the wise spider (or Anatsé in Ghanaian folklores) to disseminate cautionary messages that may afflict community members either negatively or positively. Most often, characters and settings are selected from the target audiences' locality.

People find stories memorable because they can form the basis of discussions or topics for gossip during leisure periods.

In traditional settings, folklores are important and not seen as simply ways of entertaining children, the messages so explicitly re-laid in stories guide and educate all members of the society.

The social worker is burdened with all sorts of clients. These could be delinquent children or disturbed adults- in all cases, stories could be manipulated to adapt to situations. *For instance, once plagued with a delinquent eight year old that was too lazy to assist in domestic duties or concentrate on school activities, a beautiful story was told with scenes taken from her locality.* Her situation was related to the story of a village beauty that was too lazy to help her parents on the farm or even accompany her friends on the daily chore of carrying water to the stream. On one morning trip to the farm, while others were cultivating the land, the young person was busy adorning herself with wild flowers. Of course, when the day's toil was over, the absent minded girl was left behind only to be eaten by an extremely hungry hyena. Not surprisingly, my client was so alarmed that her parents noticed an immediate and inexplicable change in her. While this simple yet frightening story may work for the young, malleable and unexposed child, adults require more intricate story telling. For instance, the next story was adopted from the USAID/BASICS Joint venture communication agenda for enhancing community self-help programmes for community benefit:

Once upon a time, there was a woman called Mama Wale in a village called Aromola. During a drought, the village river became dry. Mama Wale had to send her son Wale to fetch water from a deep well in another village called Amujeje, about 1 km away. On his way back from Amujeje where he had gone to fetch water, a big snake bit Wale. He cried for help and was luckily rescued by one of the villagers on his way to the farm. Mama Wale waited expectantly for her son. After a few hours, she got impatient and decided to trace him to the well. At Amujeje, she found her only son in the traditional healers' house being treated for snakebite. She thanked the traditional healer and took her son home. She related the son's experience to his father and blamed the incident on lack of drinking water in the village. Baba Wale took the matter to the next village meeting. A decision was taken that the village should have a source of drinking water within the next 2 months. They thanked God for preserving the life of Wale. A deep well

was dug after 2 months. They were happy because they were able to achieve their objective through community efforts.

Folktales in indigenous settings have been useful means for educating young girls on their traditional roles as housekeepers, mothers and so on. In community development, some stories have provided useful instructions on methods of cultivation, preparation of food and irrigation that would lead to more productive and organised societies. Sometimes, our elders even say that women that make bad wives are those that were too restless to listen to educative folktales that would have organised their future roles in society better.

Drums

In Africa, drums have a life of their own—they convey the unknown in a rhythmic and sometimes, mesmerising fashion. Little wonder that the most common drums used in rural communication are called “talking drums” or what the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria call “Ilu.” The Ilu is used in most cultural displays where certain people are extolled as in the activities of “praise singers” or what the Yoruba people literarily interpret as “fine begging.” Since people are favourably disposed to drum beats, and the enticing note of praise singers, change agents have often made use of a combination of both in talking to indigenous people. The process is that, the drummers give a familiar and attractive dance tune, into which community workers weave their lyrics or words to amplify their mission in the society. Songs backed up by drumbeats have been used effectively by health workers especially by BASICS, a Non governmental organisation (NGO) currently sponsored by UNESCO to facilitate the immunisation programme in Nigeria. For instance, the NGO has a Yoruba drum beat assisted song on breast-feeding that is formatted along the popular Christian lyric—Nearer My God To Thee.

Yet another drum used by the Yoruba in Western Nigeria, is the “Gbedu.” Mostly the royal family uses the Gbedu on special occasions such as the installation of chiefs. Also, the drums may be used to relay information from the Oba (King) to titleholders in each village who in turn pass same to their community members. Those policy makers that recognise the role of community opinion leaders in effecting change among indigenous people make ample use of this

channel. As a result, the communication process begins with getting the Oba to accept the usefulness of the programme. When the Oba is convinced that the programme would benefit rather than drag his people back, he would advise on those communication strategies that his people would be receptive to.

Cultural Displays

One may wonder how relevant this could be to conveying information for development. But while the first two channels—music and folk tales are the most frequently utilised, attention is currently paid to cultural displays. This channel is often likened to aggressive marketing in its most primitive nature. One may have witnessed cultural displays where the traditional ways of doing things are first displayed or enacted—either dressing, learning, health, farming, fishing, building and so on— then these are followed by the modern approved and simplified way of doing the same thing. It is assumed that indigenous people are more attuned to change when there is a gradual disentanglement from the old as seen from the display. The key factor is not a condemnation of the old but a gradual blending of the old with the new.

Its attractiveness notwithstanding, cases of its failure abound. Some may have seen cultural displays where masquerades have reacted brutally due to the aggressive or taunting message of the talking drum used in promoting a development effort. In this case, a riot could ensue that may be attributable to poor audience research and thus hastily developed communication strategies.

Other Indigenous Communication Channels

Other indigenous communication channels abound but the type adopted would be determined by results of audience analysis and relevance of information to the people. Usually, while some messages that are easily accepted by the people could be easily disseminated through a town crier in a community with great allegiance to their leader, messages that are more cogent could adopt a blend of channels. For instance, the previously mentioned Non Governmental Organisation (NGO), BASICS, used the folk theatre (or a play) to spur the need for role-playing or participation in implementing certain

community projects such as a broken bridge. Sometimes, festive occasions or initiation ceremonies are used as forums for either establishing a rapport with village people or getting prominent orators in the community to initiate the development initiative with thought provoking proverbs and riddles laden speeches.

Whatever channel adopted, winning strategies in indigenous communication are those founded on perceptions of sincerity and humility.

TOWARDS ENHANCEMENT OF THE INDIGENOUS MEDIA

No media known to man has ever had complete success in moving people to accept ideas or technology that are contrary to their cultural beliefs or age long notion of the bona fide way of doing things. Before suggesting strategies for improving indigenous, folk or traditional channels of communication, certain issues become pertinent.

First, it must be understood that the quest to try out diverse media depicts the dynamic nature of society and man has to move in time with changes in the environment to survive. The evident backwardness of indigenous people in countries where they abound spurred the need to recognise the rights of the indigenous people as amplified by the UNESCO declaration of 1995-2005 as the decade of indigenous people worldwide. The guiding motto was that no society should be disregarded in the quest for sustainable development.

Second, the realisation of this ideal should be backed up by cohesive rather than paternalistic ways of incorporating rural people in this alien or unfamiliar wind of change.

Third, communication as a tool for change, should be used with caution because communication mishandled could generate such negative sentiments to the interference of outsiders that would keep a people in the Dark ages many years from now.

With these factors in mind, I may strife to make suggestions that would with fastidiousness and further research, make the indigenous media more malleable to our duties as community social workers working with often hard to reach audiences.

Often, people assigned to work with rural communities are hardly trained for such roles. As such, they adopt a paternalistic rather than participatory approach in initiating reforms

directed at indigenous settlers (Davis and Soeftestad, 1995). The idea is that when relationships between change agents and local people are strained or seen as condescending, adoption of development efforts would be hampered.

Still related to the above is the fact that some community workers do not understand the rudiments of communication. As such, some of us (community workers) walk into a community thinking that because we have some paraphernalia from our various Ministries (e.g. drugs, fertilisers, fishing nets and so on), that everybody would be inquisitive enough to listen and unthinkingly accept our point of view. Far from this, a basic principle of communication should be understanding your audience but if you cannot do this, seek out opinion leaders in such communities, establish a rapport with them and get them to identify ways of reaching the people. For all you know, a simple act of reaching out to touch or carry the dirtiest child in the crowd could be a step in the right direction.

There are countries such as Colombia that have evolved Ministries to deal with indigenous matters. Through such ministries, and in conjunction with indigenous community councils, research is carried out into the needs of indigenous people in relation to rural development programmes and appropriate strategies for winning acceptance (Davis and Soeftestad, 1995).

It could be irritating as well as frustrating moving to the seemingly end of civilisation to enhance the living standard of a people only to be scorned. Yet, we must face these problems as social workers. We would be even less shocked if we could but understand that the indigenous people have learned to be wary or distrustful of strangers. One cannot blame them for they are custodians of our culture and tradition. Too frequent an interaction with strangers could lead to infiltration and dearth of our cultural heritage. In essence, one may advocate that for efficient use of the indigenous media:

- a) The language of the people should be understood and adopted in message dissemination. When their language cannot be understood, an interpreter should be used rather than engaging in confusing and distrustful sign language.
- b) Then there should be ample familiarisation of the indigenous knowledge, values and culture of indigenous people before initiating the communication process. When

programme initiators are conversant with the oral transmission of a people's history as depicted in folklores and proverbs, they are able to weave this into their messages for more efficient communication.

In essence, respect and understanding of a people's language and culture are central to attention given to first change agents, then their development programme. It should therefore not be surprising to hear that once you can understand a man's language, you can get him to sell his goods or in this case, his erstwhile beliefs for a song.

The problem with current attempts using indigenous media especially in developing countries is that social workers work towards dogmatic acceptance of their foreign technology. For instance, all schools set up in our (Nigerian) communities are using the English language as the language of instruction. As may be expected, most Nomadic education programmes have been laden with problems-probably because they are learning in a strange language with a relative dearth of teachers conversant with their own native language. It is my stance although I may be wrong, that effective commencements of indigenous educational or rural programmes should move first from the familiar to the unfamiliar, then with time, seek a blend of cultures. That is using both the dialect and national language of the target audience as the case may be.

Indigenous communication is further enhanced when people are assured of a blend of their indigenous technologies or knowledge or natural resources with the new technology to influence a better environment. Indigenous people are wary of change agents because like some unfulfilled promises made in Nigeria's oil rich Niger Delta Region, new knowledge or technology could lead to their displacement from their natural habitat.

CONCLUSION

It must also be emphasised that the indigenous media though unrefined has been used to convey information successfully in the past. Therefore, it becomes necessary for community-based social workers to adopt some useful strategies. *First, community-based social workers should ensure that programmes*

targeted at indigenous people are actually, what they need. In other words, indigenous people should participate in decisions about development projects suitable for their communities. Second, these social workers should apply the already accentuated strategies (use of opinion leaders, respect of culture, language, identification of recipients etc), to work towards testing and retesting messages on selected but similar samples to determine success and likely areas of change.

Though this may seem easy, caution is needed and should act as my final words. Indigenous communication may be simplicity personified because of the vast dependence on such traditional cultural gimmicks as talking drums, music, folklores and so on. But if after incorporating a new technology, indigenous people feel betrayed by expected benefits as depicted in the message content of change agents, a development effort or success achieved in the twinkle of an eye, would take a lifetime to correct.

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