



Utilising Information and Communication Technology in Reporting Development in Rural Nigeria

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Abstract: *The explosion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools has transformed the development landscape of rural sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria as one of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is considered as a potentially rich country because of the natural oil endowment, yet most of her people live in abject poverty. The situation is worse in rural areas where about 80 percent of the people dwell. In rural areas, life has never been easy as there is widespread poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and early child marriage, etc. As if these rural development problems are not enough, the mass media in Nigeria are grossly underreporting rural areas as they pay more attention to the urban centres most times to the detriment of the rural areas. This study explores ways in which ICTs could be harnessed for effective reporting of rural areas. The secondary method of data collection was used in this paper. The study argues that ICTs can be used in many ways to enhance rural development like promotion of local entrepreneurship and information gathering for development, although the use of ICTs in reporting rural areas is hampered by numerous factors such as, absence of electricity and high cost of ICTs equipment amongst other factors. The researchers recommend the establishment of national ICT policy and that electricity should be subsidised for rural dwellers.*

Key words: *Information, Communication Technology, Rural areas, Development, Reporting and Communication*

Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) is a terminology used to describe the technology responsible for transmitting, processing and communicating information using different telecommunication infrastructure. ICTs have received growing attention in recent years from

development experts, scholars, policy makers, government officials and civil society organisations in Nigeria. They are believed to contribute to improving development outcomes in two ways; ICT-based knowledge and products contribute directly to wealth creation, the use of ICTs also contributes indirectly to national development through its impact on social and economic sectors of the



economy such as agriculture, health, and education, and by empowering individuals to take advantage of new opportunities.

Individuals also benefit from the availability and use of ICTs in a number of ways, for instance, by substituting phone calls for travel, which saves time and money, and by using ICTs to obtain information on prices, for their own produce (in case of farmers) and for purchases. In these various ways, ICTs can have a significant impact on a country's ability to achieve vision 2020. ICTs have the capacity to contribute towards strengthening democracy, increasing social participation, competing in the global market, removing barriers to modernisation, and in making poor populations fuller agents in the sustainable development of Nigeria" (Iwokwagh and Obagwu, 2012, p.396).

Information and communication technologies have both latent and manifest potentials to liberate Nigerians from poverty of ideas and consequently reposition the nation for a sustainable socio-economic renewal. Information and knowledge are interrelated. Certainly, this is why Nwuneli (1985) describes information as a key that unlocks doors to new knowledge. Information ensures the flow of knowledge in modern society. Hence, failure to invest in ICTs is as negative as the refusal to invest in formal education by a nation. However, the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to revolutionise development is real, it is far from being realised especially as it concern rural areas of Nigeria.

Nonetheless, development issues in most rural Nigeria are not reported. The media in Nigeria usually

concentrates their reportage on urban areas. Idemili (1992) observes that Nigerian press neglects the rural areas in its news coverage and is primarily concerned with reporting activities in urban centres in spite of the fact that more Nigerians live in rural areas. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the utilisation of information technologies (ICTs) in reporting rural areas for development.

The Problem

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) hold tremendous potential for rural development in Nigeria. In recent years, issues of rural development are often not reported by the Nigerian media, despite expansion and penetration of ICTs and social media in most Nigerian cities and towns. The media often concentrate more on urban areas at the expense of the rural areas. The media in Nigeria place high premium on urban centres to the disadvantage of rural areas. Omeje (2004) notes that by concentrating their activities at the urban areas, the media have succeeded in creating disparity, depreciation and a gulf between urban and rural inhabitants. In Nigeria presently, the only mass medium that is accessible to both urban and rural dwellers is the radio. This is so because it has the capacity to cut through barriers of illiteracy and poor infrastructural facilities which could limit the print media and television (Okunna, 2002). Thus, the rural areas are grossly underreported. This study is carried out to explore ways of tackling this basic problem.

Objectives of the Study

1. To ascertain ways ICT can be used to enhance reporting of rural areas for development.



2. To find out the techniques for effective rural reportage in Nigeria.
3. To determine the challenges of using ICTs in reporting rural areas for development.

Conceptual Delineation

In order to attain a measure of conceptual clarity, it is important to define the following terms used in the work.

- **Information and communication technology:** Refers to systems for producing, storing, sending and retrieving digital files.
- **Reporting:** Refers to a written or spoken description of a situation, event, news, etc.
- **Rural area:** Is a geographical area that is located outside cities or urban centres.
- **Development:** Is an inward (inside the society) creation of opportunities for the actualisation of full human potentials in contexts that capture a society's ideologies, real needs and aspirations.

Theoretical Underpinning

The Diffusion of innovation theory and Technological determinism theory were used to argue the position of this paper.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Credited to Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), the theory describes how new ideas, information and culture are passed from people to people or from one geographical area to another. It involves a system of explanation on how freely or rapidly people in a society accept new ideas, depending on time, nature of media

of communication and demographic variables of the target audience. It is also a process by which an innovation is adopted and gains accepted by members of a certain community. A number of actors interact to influence diffusion of an innovation. The following are the four major factors that influence the diffusion.

- a. The innovation itself.
- b. How information about the innovation is communicated,
- c. Time
- d. The nature of the social system into which the innovation is being introduced (Rogers, 1995).

Similarly, Rogers (1995) has noted that it is one thing for an individual to decide to adopt a new idea, but a different thing to put the innovation into use. The last phase of confirmation therefore may see the innovation being incorporated into the culture of the user population or it may undergo changes (re-invention) or it may be discontinued.

Diffusion of innovation theory therefore would provide a fitting framework for understanding the innovation of using ICTs in reporting rural areas for development and failure to use it may hinder effective rural development. It would also provide an important model for exploring the successes and benefits recorded in the use of ICTs in reporting developmental issues and challenges of using ICT in reporting rural areas for development.

Technological Determinism Theory

Technological determinism is also used in this study because it places emphasis on the importance of technology in the development of any nation. This explains why Lievrouw and



Livingstone (2006) remark that the technological determinism theory is the belief that technologies have an overwhelming power to drive human actions and social change. Dominick (2009) affirms this when he states that the technological determinism theory derives historical and cultural changes, that is, all social, political, economic and cultural changes are influenced by advances in technological innovation and diffusion (like using ICTs in reporting rural areas for development).

The crux of this paper is that the use of ICTs in reporting rural areas would bring about social, political, economic and cultural transformation in the lives of rural dwellers and ultimately result in the much needed development of these areas in Nigeria.

Method

This discourse employs qualitative research procedure. Emphasis was particularly on observational and inferential approaches of data gathering. This is because data were obtained from manifest content and literature of scholars in different field of communication, mass media and information and communication technology.

Literature Review

What is development?

Development is the act or process of creating something over a period of time. Development may be seen as efforts individuals make over from point "A" to a more desirable point "B" (Nwanne, 2012, p.237). Amucheazi (1980, p.4) defines development as a "multidimensional process involving the totality of man in his political, economic, psychological, social relations, among others".

Development entails internally self-generated effort towards continuous positive change by the use of resources to create wealth in terms of individual and societal needs without jeopardizing the chances of future generation in realising their needs (Ukonu, 2004, p.80). Supporting this view, Rodney (1972, p.9) conceptualises development in human society as a many sided process, which at the individual level:

implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Some of these are virtually moral categories and difficult to evaluate..., however what is indispensable is that the achievement of any of these aspects of personal development is very much tied to the state of society as a whole.

Development is about the improvement of the individual in important and useful ways. Okunna (2002, p.294) aptly put it thus "development should bring change, the change should be for the better, the change should be for the benefit of the majority of the people, the process should be participatory, that is involve the people as closely as possible".

The Link between Development and Communication

There is a realistic relationship between communication and development. Communication as the process of sharing meaning is strongly related to development. Communication is an indispensable tool for achieving meaningful development. However, this is so considering the fact that any



meaningful development must strive towards improving the lot of humans in society. And this cannot be achieved without communication, since the development protagonists or agents must be in close touch with the targets of the developmental projects (Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor, 2003, p.30). This is consistent with Okunna's (2002, p.293) view that "it has become generally accepted that communication and development are so closely inter-connected that there can be no development without communication".

In addition, Okenwa (2002, p.1) has argued that:

Communication is central to the process of development to the extent that the dependence of one on the other has virtually been taken for granted. To properly understand this relationship between the two concepts of communication and development, it is important to put in context the role of communication in the actualisation of the process of development.

The nucleus is that communication and development play complementary roles. Therefore, while holistic development efforts include development of the quantity and quality of communication infrastructure-cum-messages, communication plays a number of roles in the development enterprise. These roles, according to Nwodu (2002, p.5), include:

- Creating a climate of development by adequately informing the people and encouraging them to embrace

positive changes that can enhance their well-being.

- Encouraging people to aim high as well as developing new taste to the point of desiring the good things in life.
- Focusing people's attention to the development process thereby sensitising their maximum participation in the development effort.
- Helping the people to understand and appreciate government policies meant to enhance their living conditions.

Above all, communication and development are twin concepts that are inseparable. Communication is needed to bring development messages to the attention of the masses while development is required to facilitate the growth and sophistication of communication infrastructure.

Rural Reporting in Nigeria

Communication with rural people is a complex process involving a combination of traditional and modern mass media. In particular, mass media have been known worldwide to possess certain qualities that make their use imperative if the communication is aimed at a wider and heterogeneous audience. The media system in Nigeria seems to be biased in favour of the urban areas. Media reports are centered on happenings in the state capitals, major urban towns and cities; little is heard of the rural areas.

Udoakah (1998) avers that journalism in Africa is basically an urban phenomenon. Helping to perpetuate this urban posture is the fact that almost, if not all media outfits are located in urban



areas with little or no reporters in the rural areas. He further likened the neglect of rural areas by the mass media to the manner that developing countries are neglected by the international news media. The rural areas are in the news when something significant happens, such as the inauguration of a community project by some government officials or some other occurrences like the outbreak of an epidemic. While writing on the issue, Pate (2009) says that, the existing broadcasting system is not able to satisfy the yearnings of the people for reasons such as cost, access, elitism and urban-centredness.

Similarly, most programmes purportedly targeted at the rural audience are hardly relevant to the needs and aspirations of the people. They are not able to identify with them as the contents are not contextualised to the situation of the rural dwellers. Also, "media coverage of the grassroots (especially rural communities) in Nigeria seems to be meager and often negative and the media are sometimes alienated from the communities and their audience" (Anaeto, 2011, p.189). For instance, the *Pioneer* newspaper owned by the Akwa Ibom State Government in its maiden editorial on Monday, April 11, 1988 stated:

We will seek to uplift the concept of regional journalism which we recognise immediately as a daunting task in a media environment where media house pretends to be "National". The regional journalism we aim to practice will be anchored on a faithful coverage of rural Akwa Ibom, mainstream Akwa Ibom, the

nation and the world in that order ...

Contrary to the mission statements of these media houses, the Nigeria press, as Idemili (1992) observes, neglect the rural areas in its coverage and is primarily concerned with reporting activities in the urban centres, in spite of the fact that more Nigerians live in rural areas. This neglect of the rural areas may be due to inability or unwillingness of the media house to put in place appropriate and practical measures to ensure effective reportage of the rural areas (Eshett, 2011, p.93).

Areas where ICTs could be used in Reporting Rural Areas for Development

There is no gainsaying that one of today's realities is rapid development of societies, in all areas of life - social, political, economic and cultural. ICTs could be used in reporting rural areas for development in many areas. Some of them include:

1. Area of improving Quality Health among the rural People: Health care is one of the challenges confronting rural dwellers in Nigeria and other parts of the world. ICT can be used to facilitate remote consultation, diagnosis, and treatment. Health workers in rural areas that have access to internet can access relevant up-to-date information through ICT that could enhance their operations. Radio and Television (and more recently the internet) are well known for their history of effectively facilitating the dissemination of public health campaigns and disease prevention strategies in developing countries.

For instance in *Ginnact*, a remote Island village on the Gambia River, nurses use a digital camera to take pictures of symptoms for examination by



a doctor in a nearby town. The physician can send the pictures over the internet to a medical institute in the United Kingdom for further evaluation. X-ray images can also be compressed and sent through existing telecommunications networks.

2. Distributing locally relevant Information: Where information is provided in the local language and with locally relevant content, the community can benefit significantly. The village information shops in Pondicherry, India provide information using the Tamil language and Tamil script in computers (Sentilk Umaran and Arunachalam, 2002, cited in Owotade, 2013). The above and other similar projects in India provide information on:

- Rural market
- Rural newspaper
- Rural matrimony
- E-education
- Employment news
- Forms of various government schemes.

3. Use of ICT in Agricultural and Rural Transformation: Advances in scientific discoveries, communication technologies and educational practices invariably facilitated procedures in effecting the transfer of messages, knowledge and instruction required by rural farmers necessary for agricultural and rural transformation. In most developing countries like Nigeria, opportunities offered by ICT can be exploited for enhancing the income of farmers and other rural dwellers through improved knowledge about new ways of farming, fishing, animal production and home management.

For instance in Zambia, they use *linknet* to provide local internet access to farmers and people. Linknet is an innovative project run by the international organisation “Macha works”. This linknet gives farmers up-to-date information about commodity prices via mobile phone. This enables farmers to be in a better position to negotiate terms with transporters and agents before going to the market to sell their farm products.

4. Information gathering for Development and Transformation: ICTs can help to gather and update information from rural areas to assist the federal government or state government to build database on issues such as environmental pollution (like pipe-line leakages), food production, erosion, climate change, and remote sensing technologies can be used for planning purposes and the rural areas stand to benefit from them.

5. Using ICTs to promote Local Entrepreneurship: ICTs have the potential to impact the livelihood strategies of small-scale enterprises and local entrepreneurs operating in our various communities in Nigeria. ICTs can be used in area of human capital, through increased knowledge of new skills through distance learning and processes required for certification and social capital, ICTs could help entrepreneurs to cultivate contacts beyond their immediate communities. Also, ICTs can assist entrepreneurs through financial capital, communication with lending organisations for micro credit like micro finance banks, etc.

6. Strengthening Education: ICTs can be used to strengthening education in Nigeria. In developing countries, distance education programmes help to educate



more people for less money. UNESCO and the World Bank have reported that in the world's 10 biggest distance education institutions, the majority of which are in the third world, the cost of education per student is on average about one third the costs at traditional institutions in the same country.

However, in primary and secondary education, radio and television are increasingly important means of reaching the rural poor. In Mexico, over 700,000 secondary school students in remote villages now have access to the *telesecundaria* programme which provides televised classes and a comprehensive curriculum through closed circuit television, satellite transmissions and teleconferencing between students and teachers.

Techniques for effective Rural Reportage in Nigeria

Since Nigeria mass media places accent in covering activities and issues in urban areas, there is need for a paradigm shift in their reportage, especially by balancing the two sides. There should be a parting from the conventional desultory reportage of the rural areas. The following techniques or approach will help to guarantee effective rural reportage;

1. Adapting Development News Reporting: This technique provides news and information on developmental projects or programmes of the government, individuals and non-governmental organisations. This type of news reporting is also known as rural reporting. Development news reporting is being advocated by the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America because of the urban nature

reporting of the existing forms of the mass media.

2. Embark on Citizen Journalism: It refers to varieties of activities in which people (ordinary citizens) contribute information or commentary about news events. Citizen Journalism is also known as "public participatory" or "guerrilla" journalism (Olumuji, Asemah and Edegoh, 2013, p.5). This growing trend in journalism practice also involves members of the public playing an active role in the process of collecting, analysing and reporting news and information.

People in the rural areas who have access to internet-enable phone could report relevant issues of concern by uploading and posting such things to the internet. This is the case for *Sahara* reporters.

3. Adapt the News Values: Journalist in Nigeria have learnt through trainings the various criteria that must be applied in considering the news worthiness of events or issues. These include timeliness, proximity, prominence, oddity, magnitude, human interest, consequence, and conflict. Consequently, to Nigerian Journalist, the greatest of the news values is prominence. They think there are no prominent personalities in the rural areas.

Eshett (2011, p.95) has noted that "it is not only when people occupy high public offices that they can be considered prominent". There are a lot of retirees, clergies, traditional rulers, business people, civil servants, social activists, creative artists, traditional scientists, herbalists and traditional birth attendants, etc., in the rural areas. These people are all prominent and should be so considered.



4. Post Correspondence to Rural Areas: A correspondent is a news reporter who writes or corresponds from a location outside the city where the news organisation is sited. However, the norm in media organisations in Nigeria is to assign reporters to urban centres and only send them occasionally to rural areas. Such measure hampers the effective coverage of rural areas. Several social functions and news worthy events take place in the rural areas from time to time. But there is no way such events can be reported since reporters are not posted in the rural areas.

At times, the rural dwellers may want to invite reporters to cover events in the rural communities, but the cost implication of having to travel to the state capital to invite reporters always deter them. The only way to ameliorate the issue is to post correspondents to cover the rural areas.

5. Adoption of the Local Language in Media Presentation of developmental Programmes: Although there are literate people in rural areas, reporters assigned to cover rural communities should as much as possible use the language of the people. Language is very important in socialisation.

6. Print Journalist should make Newspaper and Magazines Available in Rural Communities: The presence of newspapers and magazines in the rural areas will create the willingness in the rural residents to speak to the media. The mere seeing of what one spoke or an event that occurred printed in the newspaper will evoke so much interest in the rural people.

The Challenges of using ICTs in Reporting Rural Areas for Development

There are several impediments to the successful use of information and communication technology in reporting rural areas for development in Nigeria. They include:

- **Unavailability of Electricity:** Many rural areas in Nigeria have no access to electricity. Even when there is electricity, it is extremely unstable. Some rural areas in Nigeria are not connected to the national grid for regular supply of power. This affects ICTs operations and use in rural areas.
- **High cost of ICT Equipment:** Another challenge in ICTs use in reporting rural development is unavailability and affordability of computers and other equipments, as well as their maintenance. The price of computer hardware and software continues to drop in most developed countries, but in developing countries, such as Nigeria, the cost of computers is still very expensive, at least, to the average Nigerian. While a personal computer may cost far less than a month's wages in the United States, the average Nigeria worker may require more than two or three months income to buy one.
- **Weak Infrastructure:** In Nigeria, a formidable obstacle to the use of information and communication technology is infrastructural deficiency. Most rural dwellers do not have access to basic infrastructural facilities.
- **Low Literacy Levels and Lack of ICT Personnel:** Literacy rates are very low in rural areas in Nigeria.



The situation gets worse when it comes to computer literacy. There are fewer computer-literate personnel in the rural areas compared to the urban centres. For instance if farmers are to make good use of ICTs, the extension officers who advise and train farmers need to acquire more knowledge and skills in ICTs. As this is presently not the situation, it has created a negative effect in the use of ICTs in the rural areas of Nigeria.

- **Lack of Internet Access:** There is the problem of access to the internet in the rural areas in Nigeria which is a major pre-requisite to the provision of effective telecommunication services to these places. Owing to the small number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), access to the internet is very expensive and highly limited to a few urban areas.
- **The Issue of Local Content:** Poor local content and unavailability of instructional manuals in local languages is also a major challenge in the use of ICTs for Nigeria's rural development. Statistics indicate that over 85 percent of the content on the internet is in English. Thus, if one is not literate in English, there is very little or no benefit to be derived from the internet. The problem of local content is compounded by the multiplicity of languages in Nigeria. Many alphabets in most languages in Nigeria use characters that are not found on computer keyboards.

- **User Acceptance:** ICTs provide opportunities for development while desirable outcomes always arise from the actions of people. It is often taken for granted that whatever technology transfer to the rural areas would be accepted. What is usually forgotten is that the rural dwellers have their own established cultural and traditional ways of doing things. Any outside imposition of ideas or systems might therefore not be easily accepted.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that rural dwellers could have incredible resources if they have access to the internet. By using Information and Communication Technology in reporting rural areas, there would be fundamental changes in the life of the rural people. ICT is a change agent we cannot ignore. Nigeria as a developing nation cannot be isolated from the wind of globalisation. The study therefore recommends among other things that: Government should encourage and fund the establishment of ICTs in the rural areas of Nigerian. There should be electricity subsidy for rural dwellers. Government should provide the rural residents with computers and other ICT equipment at subsidized prices or on hire purchase. The issue of low local content in ICT development in Nigeria should be addressed. Constant and stable electricity supply should be provided to the rural communities of Nigeria. Sensitisation of the importance of ICTs in the development of the rural areas should be given serious attention in planning ICT programmes in the rural areas. Rural development policies have to be



concerned not only with the economic, cultural and social needs of the rural dwellers but also with their informational needs. Government should establish and fund community media. Awards should be instituted for best rural area reporters and rural media outfits. There should be a well-established national ICT policy by Government.

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