INDIGENOUS-MODERN COMMUNICATION INTERFACE FOR SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT

*Des Wilson**

Abstract

In recent years, the long neglected issues and problems which affect the Nigerian environment have become the focus of public attention and coverage by the mass media. This paper addresses the need to have a more focused and sustainable environmental development programme supported by articulate, critical and perceptive media. It traces the recent interest in the environment to the 1984 Koko Waste Dump episode and urges that there should be an interface between indigenous channels of communication and modern mass media in order that the problems may be more adequately addressed. The paper proposes strategies for this interface and recommends among others that continent-wide environmental policies should be formulated and implemented.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, there has been so much media hype on the critical issues affecting the Nigerian environment that even first time visitors to the country could be misled into thinking that Nigeria is a country with solid credentials in the area of sustainable environmental development. The truth, however, is that Nigeria was a reluctant joiner in the campaign which was ignited in the 1990s by environmental and human rights activists. Prominent among these groups was the Ogoni human rights group known as Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). MOSOP may have been inspired by the

*Des Wilson, Department of Communication Arts, Univeristy of Uyo, Uyo.

activism of Greenpeace in Europe and elsewhere around the world. Led by the writer-journalist-activists Ken Saro-Wiwa until his execution on November 10, 1995, MOSOP, brought into broad relief the reality of the environmental degradation taking place in the Niger Delta. This is not to say that concerns for the environment in Nigeria only started with MOSOP.

The first real break came with the Koko toxic waste episode in which an Italian company, working with a local agent, dumped several drums of toxic waste or radioactive materials in the compound of Chief Nana who subsequently died from complications arising from the toxic wastes. Since the Koko Waste Dump episode in 1984, pro-environmental action has gained a lot of grounds in the country.

The Buhari Government in 1984 responded to environmental problems by extending its War Against Indiscipline (WAI) to include a war against indiscriminate refuse dumping because of the mountains of garbage which threatened to drown cities like Lagos at the time. But unfortunately, not many Nigerians even recognize that they have a right to a clean and healthy environment. The importance of a clean and healthy environment has been the concern of the World Commission on Environment and Development which has clearly highlighted the need for environmental health to be incorporated into every nation's socioeconomic development programme. Unfortunately

for mankind, economic considerations continue to be the deciding factors in project initiation and implementation, while ignoring the potential health and environmental hazards of such projects.

Today, environmental and health concerns, dominated in part by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, cannot be wished away as simply reflecting cultural or technical bias displayed by the more developed nations against the less developed ones. The fear of contaminants in food and levels of radioactivity in the human environment cannot be the internal affairs of any one country. One cannot hold back atmospheric movements across territories. Such a possibility would have encouraged complacency among nations with the capacity to manage their own national environments at the level their national policies permit. The image of the global village is ever present and visible and perhaps threatening in our recognition of our seeming collective helplessness that we cannot afford to be complacent. Therefore, a unanimity of action is required in the worldwide concern for our environment its present state of near entrapment in the quagmire of unprecedented climate changes, depletion of the ozone layer, acid rain and energy production through the burning of fossil fuel, oil leaks, nuclear testing by France, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Great Britain and the United States. These countries have failed to respect the moratorium protocol which they freely signed with respect to embargo on nuclear weapons testing. Even the recent repudiation of the Kyoto Protocol by the United States does not mean she is environmentally safer than other countries, given the fact that she contributes to world environmental pollution at a level higher than the world average! Kyoto was once the hope of the world and then Johannesburg. This dream has been kept on hold by the present United States Government.

DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS CONCEPTS

Kari Levin (1994:74) speaks of development as a human right when he says: "Development is ultimately not about finance when he says: "Development is ultimately not about finance, but about people; their motivation, aspirations, creativity and values." Leon (1994) also says that Development cannot exist without participation; participation cannot take place without communication, while Gichuru (1994:4) notes that "…sustainable development is not simply a call for environmental protection" but implies a new concept of economic growth–one that provides fairness and opportunity for all the world's people without further destroying the world's finite natural resources." And he adds that 'if development is to widen the range of peoples' choices, it must do so not only for current generation but for future generations. In other words, it must be sustainable." That development communication cannot exist without participation and participation cannot exist without communication seems to be the crux of the matter. Article 8 of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action states as follows:

Democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually

reinforcing." And as the Ayala Corporation in its solidarity message to the Vienna Conference in 1993 noted:

There is no greater human right than the right to live…in peace, freedom and economic sufficiency through sustainable development.

In ordinary parlance, the term "environment" refers to our surroundings but in specific scientific terms as Mbipom (2000:44) notes, our environment "is made up of lithosphere, atmosphere and the hydrosphere consisting of the oceans, rivers, streams, reservoirs and groundwater." He notes further that the environment "is the life support system, supplying resources as well as assimilating waste produced and released to it"

Clearly, when we speak about sustainable development as an environmental correlate, we cannot avoid the role of communication in this context. And when we speak of communication we inescapably must be concerned about the appropriate media and channels that may be desirably used to achieve our development goals and objectives. It is in this light, that we have decided to explore the now familiar concept of a trado-modern communication, since the problems of our environment derive from our simple natural environments to the complexities of unplanned urbanization programmes which have created our urban villages.

Health and Environmental Issues
The traditional occupations of rural people in Nigeria which are largely affected by environmental factors include farming, fishing, mining, weaving, building of houses and boats, road construction and making of wood-based artifacts and decors. Experience

from modern industrial activities has shown that these traditional occupations are at risk of being forgotten since they are based on forest, sea and soil products.

Modern forms of these are seen in traditional hospitality and businesses such as, buying and selling of products of the forest, sea and land. In many cases leaves are used as wrappings for food and other products. This dependence on leaves for food packaging poses a big problem in the cities. These and other forms of environmental degradation, indiscriminate tree felling, erosion and unprofessional farming practices pose a grave danger to the contribution of these traditional occupations.

Urbanization carries with it a lot of problems some of which are sometimes identified by the ignorant as constituting indices of development namely, long queues of vehicular traffic and massive housing estates with little thought given to parks, recreational and other facilities. Coupled with these are the massive household wastes households which are not properly discharged. With the growing pressures on urban centers due to waves of migrations from rural areas, the hope of achieving an efficient environmental control is bleak. The WHO estimates that 51.8% of the population of the world now lives in urban areas.

Juliana Ezeoke in a report in *Tell Magazine* (June 28, 2004) paints a grim picture of the environmental disaster that urban Lagos has become. In the report, she points out that apart from the pressing population, 'the drains are blocked making it impossible for easy flow of water so the refuse dumps on the streets decay, causing environmental pollution and flood.' She repeats the

statistically unsettling fact that Lagos is 'one of the dirtiest cities in the world.' She also fingers the 'attitude of people' as the big cause of the problem (p.48).

Furthermore, pesticides (herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, rodenticides), fertilizers, food additives (preservatives, sweetners, colouring agents and enhancers), veterinary drugs, industrial chemicals, detergents, household products, etc. pose environmental problems in varying degrees. Some pesticides are known sources of domestic suicides. Game and domestic animals used as table meat now pose grave danger to human beings as in the mad cow disease, SARS and some in determinant freak infections and death arising from the consumption of beef and poultry products.

Indigenous Channels of Communication

Indigenous media and channels of communication which may be employed in this enterprise include the following: political, economic, recreational, vocational, and professional, educational, cultural, social, spiritual, voluntary and family groups.

(a) Political Interest Groups (PIGs) include political associations/parties, socio-political unions, Women in Nigeria, ethnic and town unions, National Council of Women Societies. For example, political parties must reflect environmental policies in their manifestoes which the leaders should sell to the membership.

(b) Economic Interest Groups (EIGs) include the numerous development associations and unions in various communities, such as Market Women's Associations, self-help groups, cooperative societies and 'Osusu.' Business and trade groups generate a lot of filth. Waste management companies should be set up in each state to collaborate with these groups.

(c) Recreation Groups (RGs) are essentially set up for the purpose of providing entertainment and leisure activities, including choral groups, viewers clubs, sports clubs, etc. Disposal of bottles and cans in hospitality institutions is a great problem. Hotels and restaurants must be forced to provide an effective waste management system.

(d) Vocational and professional groups are set up to address the occupational interest of members and most often perform the functions of negotiating remuneration and welfare issues with employers of labour. They include the various labour or trade unions like the Nigeria Union of Journalists, Academic Staff Union of Universities, National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives, etc. If mobilized properly they can assist in environmental care.

(e) Educational institutions are traditional training channels in society, including schools, colleges and universities, cultural centres, museums, sororities, and libraries. Training in environmental maintenance consciousness should be a must in our educational institutions. The picture in many public

educational institutions does not speak well of these institutions as many of them reflect some of the seamy aspects found in the larger society.

(f)   Cultural groups are set up to promote the cultural interests of the society and specifically of the group members. These include the numerous masquerade groups, choral groups, festival, traveling theatres and events like traditional wedding ceremonies or initiation rites. Songs, drama programmes should be produced for educating the populace.

(g)   Social clubs are essentially socializing centers. They are similar in some ways to recreational centers but they do much more than recreate. They include drinking clubs, fan clubs, alumni associations, Police Officers Wives Associations and prominent clubs like Peoples Club of Nigeria, Island Club (Lagos), etc

(h)   Spiritual groups are organized to address the spiritual needs of members. Some of them are esoteric groups such as lodges, Idiong Society (Akwa Ibom), Ogboni (South-West Nigeria), Owegbe Cult (Edo State), AMORC, witchcraft societies, shrines and those organized in open places and buildings like churches, mosques, temples, prayer guilds, as well as Catholic Women's Organisations and spiritual journeys like pilgrimages. Christianity provides the adage: cleanliness is next to godliness. This dictum should be taught and practicalized in the lives of members of each congregation.

(i)   Voluntary organisations are those service organisations whose membership objective is to help the less privileged of society. They include groups like Rotary, Lions, Inner wheel, Lioness, Zonta International, Federation of Akwa Ibom Women's Association (FAIWA), etc. They can be organized to teach environmental health awareness.

(j)   Family meetings are organized either for members of a nuclear family or extended family. They include the large family unions in big cities where membership is drawn even from among persons who came from the same village or community. The first step to success in sustainability should begin in the family. Here the basic information about our environment, including how we can care for it or nurture it, should be provided.

(k)   In addition to the above channels, another indigenous communication system which is rather a combination of media is the use of the town crier. The town crier employs a wide variety of media instruments depending on the nature of the message. In this case, the task is for the town crier to disseminate information on a wide variety of topics related to environmental development. Essentially, the channels would be seen as more effective in this regard with the town crier merely providing supportive information.

especially in communal duties and sanctions.

Modern Media of Communication

Many of the issues arising from our health and environmental concerns are recent and therefore modern in conceptualization. By this very fact, it would seem inevitable that the media of modern communication would appear to provide the more versatile channel for message dissemination on these issues. These media comprise print, electronic and unconventional forms which are largely used as supplementary media. The uses of which they can be put are largely and widely known and acknowledged but what are often glossed over are their shortcomings. This seemingly rigid adherence to the idea that they are unassailable is a product of uninformed thinking regarding discarded theories.

Perhaps, our position can be strengthened here through a realization that new media do not necessarily replace old ones but rather replace some of their functions. For even now the old media soothsayers are back on a new round of prognostications about the future of television. For example, whereas the demise of the cinema was long predicted in western society with the arrival of television, this has not happened. While it is true that the internet has led to a reduction in the purchase of some books by some libraries, this does not necessarily mean we are about to witness the disappearance of books whose boom through the invention of Guttenberg's press more than 500 years ago led to what McLuhan proclaimed as the Gutternberg Gallaxy. Also, of High Definition Television (HDTV),

Interactive TV and Games. TV, the end of television has already been predicted. The new magic technology touted to take over every home is the computer and Internet technology. Today, in America, there is computer technology available to every two persons whereas in Nigeria the figure is about one computer to over 400 persons (NTA News Report, Wednesday July 28, 2004).

Yet there is equally a great fear among both users and non-users of the internet trying to lead us to a situation of a single collective consciousness – a clear reminder of our 80s fear of cultural synchronization and media imperialism.

However, it is our recognition that modern media of communication are handicapped in some ways in situation where indigenous or traditional communication media and channels are more effective that has led to the advocacy for a traditional and modern communication interface to ensure sustainable development.
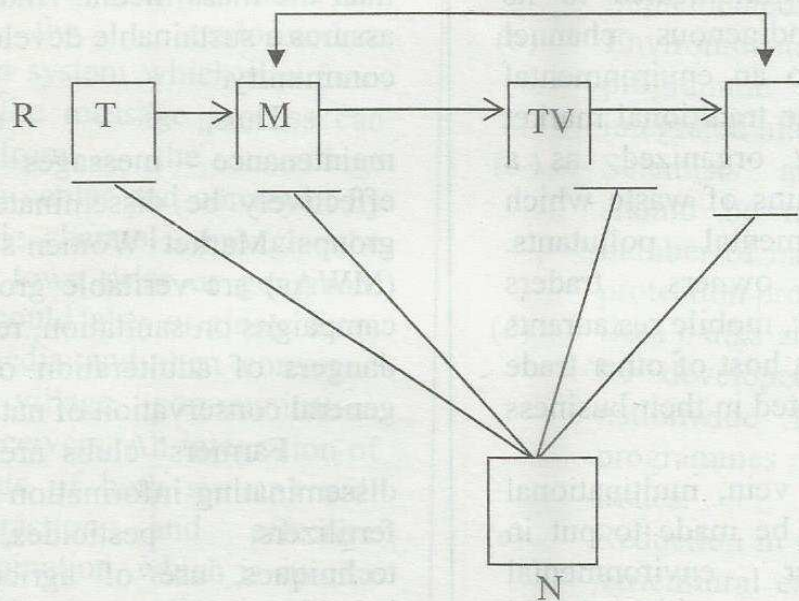
Strategies for Sustainable Development

A few years back, while it may have seemed that concerns raised by those conscious of the threatening environmental and health problems of the time were perceived as false alarmists, today the near total encirclement of our lives with these problems no longer allows us the luxury of the complacency of the last decade. The extent of the present problem has made it inevitable that perhaps the only feasible thing to do in our circumstance is to adopt communication strategies which could help stem the present crisis. This means that we have to employ realistic media strategies which could

ensure a sustainable environmental development.

The greatest task best us is how to create an awareness in the population and provide a machinery for sustaining the management of our environment. There is thus the need for the creation of an interface between indigenous (or traditional) and modern communication systems. Wilson's (1988) proposal of a trado-modern communication model for rural-urban setting, (see model below) is a four-component system which provides a sustainable media mix. Even though this model has been known for some time now, it has not yet been formally adopted by policy makers,

change agents and mobilizers or government as a viable strategy to combat the problems of incommunication, miscommunication, and singularity arising from a failure to adapt to change-inducers. It may also be the case that the non-adoption of the model is because some foreign `experts' have not made commendating remarks on it. For whatever it is worth in terms of foreign inputs, one would wish to recall that as far back as 24 years ago, UNESCO had equally suggested this combination as a panacea for our frequent communication message failures.

T	-	Town crier uses drum gong
M	-	Message
TV	-	Television
R	-	Receiver
N	-	Noise

Thus, a number of channels of indigenous communication already discussed above can be used in combination with modern mass media to

ensure that campaign messages do not end up as single short, one-channel presentations but multimedia, multi-channel and continuing transactional

process which merges into each other like the middle and end stretches of a stream.

Indigenous channels pervade the activities of the rural-urban dwellers and are critical in certain decision-making processes in various communities. Some of the channels are formal and to other informal, and they are organized for certain primary purposes including inter group communication. Take for example, the Market Women's Association. It is organized interests of its membership. It controls pricing and changes in the retail market. In the course of its activities, other communication messages which were received by the leadership through the mass media are communicated to its members. This indigenous channel should be critical to an environmental policy which sees the traditional market place, as currently organized, as a generator of mountains of waste which constitute environmental pollutants. Therefore, shop owners, traders hawkers, restaurateur, mobile restaurants (food vendors) and a host of other trade groups must be targeted in their business environment.

In the same vein, multinational oil companies must be made to put in place a proper environmental management programme which should reflect a nation-wide, continent-wide policy as enunciated in the Kyoto protocol and the earlier Earth Summit in Brazil. The existence interface is informal and uncoordinated as it largely depends on the discriminatory impulses of the gatekeeper at the initial stage of the information flow process. There is therefore the need to ensure a

formalization of the process whereby mass media messages directed at certain segments of the population are reinforced through news releases and circulars sent to specific organisations for presentation to their membership. Such organisations, in return, should also have a means of getting back to the originating sources through the mass media and their own news releases and circulars.

There are also message types that should go to specific channels because they are better positioned to ensure that the message trickles down effectively to their membership. Such group-channel information system is more dependable for disseminating development messages than the mass media. And its flexibility assures a sustainable development in any community.

Thus, environmental maintenance messages will most effectively be disseminated within the groups. Market Women's Associations (MWAs) are veritable groups to use in campaigns on sanitation, refuse disposal, dangers of adulteration of goods, and general conservation of nature.

Farmers' clubs are channels for disseminating information on the use of fertilizers, pesticides, farming techniques, use of agricultural lands, irrigation and so on. Such messages as contained in radio farmers club programmes on radio (and television) in states would have the desired effect of retransmission, if video and cassettes could be made available to members in their club houses.

Community Viewing Centres (CVCs) still remain veritable channels for the achievement of this media mix in

rural areas. Such an interface would ensure sustainable development as the learning process goes on rather than a situation where the information is forgotten after one broadcast slot. CVCs become inevitable when we consider the level of present development in Third World Countries and when we realize that indigenous communication systems are complex and function as part of the larger socio-political process in the society. They can be used to sensitize, conscientize, sanitize and mobile people towards positive action more easily than modern mass media. The latter are ever present but clearly do not elicit the same level of authority and legitimating as found in traditional media processes.

In the trado-modern communication system which is a four-step process, the message process can originate from the village communication center and conveyed by the traditional channel through the agency of the town crier or gongman. The message could also originate from the modern media and then conveyed through the village communication centre to the receivers. An integration of all the elements of both systems will enhance interaction and effective message dissemination, which is sure to reach the target audience. This multimedia, multichannel approach could provide the key to most of our communication problems in the rural-urban settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Today, the skepticism that greeted every environmental danger alert and warning in the past has been turned into a large oasis of goodwill and affirmative averment and action albeit too slow to meet the level of threat. From the above, it is clear that it is equally inevitable that we have to propose remedial and long-term solutions to environmental problems. Therefore, the following recommendations are hereby made to provide some direction to the remedial and other actions that are currently being employed or which we propose so that succeeding generations can benefit from them:

(a)   Continent-wide environment policies sponsored by the AU should be adopted and implemented.

(b)   Environmental protection programme (EPP) should be integrated into national planning.

(c)   Scientists and field workers should be trained in adequate number of handle environmental protection problems.

(d)   Data banks and databases should be developed and established nationwide to serve research programmes on environmental issues.

(e)   Reduction in intensive horizontal agricultural expansion should be encouraged so as to retain soil fertility for some time and reduce denudation.

(f)   Undoctored evaluation of a broad range of environmental factors (Environmental Impact Assessment – EIA) including biological, physical, economic and sociocultural element should be conducted in order to provide information on opportunities for

development, and this should play a major role in determining the feasibility of establishment resettlement schemes with regard to displaced communities. This assessment should also embrace the ecological costs of successful land settlement and the need for improved infrastructure; and the risks to human health must be fully incorporated in the project design, as envisaged in the 1988 FAO Guidelines.

(g)   Government departments charged with the responsibility of overseeing environmental problems should work in cooperation with well established NGOs to ensure a greater effectiveness.

(h)   In order to avoid alienation and its associated conditions, media and other campaigns should be consistent safeguarding the natural and cultural heritage as part of a movement for transnational cooperation and greater democracy.

(i)   Great care must be taken to avoid the creation of adverse environmental impacts through poor project design or management which may reduce the sustainability of projects and could foreclose further development opportunities.

(j)   The adage that prevention is better than cure should form the basis for our reaction to these problems. preventive measures should be promoted using tradio-modern communication at all stages of our development projects in order to ensure sustainable development.

(k)   Finally, premium should be given to environmental education from elementary school to the tertiary level. Environmental issues should be integrated into the curriculum at various levels of our educational system. Similarly, the right to a clean and safe environment must be taught and promoted in the media to ensure sustainable growth and development in our society. And this should begin from the home in simple lessons on hygiene, refuse disposal and consumption habits.

The role of the media in all these is inevitable and should be based on the trado-modern communication model already proposed in this paper.

CONCLUSION

It is a matter of course that one has to conclude after our long discourse that it is absolutely necessary for Nigeria and the African continent to take a concerted action to save the environment from further degradation. Africa cannot continue to wait until the problems have totally overwhelmed her. The African Union (AU) must adopt a continent-wide policy on the environment which can reflect a seriousness on our part to salvage our deteriorating environment from further decay.

One cannot resist the temptation to quote Francesco di Castri (1990:7) who in arguing a case for Europe opines that.

Europe will have to throw its whole weight into a campaign for the adoption and application of wide ranging international conventions... binding on all countries of the world, and for the establishment of a form of suitable development and in the Third World.

This view has to be claimed for Africa. There is still some narrow opportunity for us to redress the negligence of our immediate past and present. All hope is not lost. Through our various acts of omission and commission we have degraded and destabilized the ecosystem. It is obvious that when the stability of the natural processes is altered, the environmental, social and economic consequences are often disastrous. For example, it could lead to soil erosion, floods, drought, new disease vectors as in the case of HIV/AIDS, depletion of commercial species, species extinction and climatic changes like the present global warming, among others. Now is the time for us to bring to an end these anti-environment acts which are detrimental to our long-term survival.

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