

Health
COMMUNICATION,
Gender Violence
and ICTs in Nigeria

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The Role of the Internet in Achieving Sustainable Development of Rural Africa: A Fact or A Farce?

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Introduction

The importance of development becomes more and more a subject to critically discuss, and this is so because more than ever before, the state of human existence has become a cause for concern. There has emerged a great need to achieve a holistic and sustainable development, which will secure the future of coming generations. This study examines first of all the different perspectives of development and sustainable development. Then it examines the role of the Internet in achieving sustainable development in the rural areas of Africa. We eventually conclude that for the Internet to truly become a tool for development communication, some preconditions must be met.

The Concept of Development

According to Dandaura (1999), the term development is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is one of the most diversely defined terms, particularly in these contemporary times when issues that bother on the improvement of the quality of human life is at the fore of scholarly discuss. Development is particularly difficult to define because it lives up to its name, that is, the criteria for measuring it keep developing from time to time, thereby making the term at best a moving target for definition. The implication of this is that it is very difficult to arrive at a definition for development that will still be encompassing in the next few years

Nevertheless, some scholars have attempted the definition of this all-encompassing concept. According to Ogai (2003), the term development as it is used in the contemporary sense can be viewed as a three-dimensional concept. According to him, it has a utilitarian or consummatory dimension, which connotes an increase in the quality

of usable items or goods available to man in his society. Secondly, it has a behavioural or relational dimension which defines the nature of relationships existing among societies; and thirdly, it also possesses the institutional and structural dimension of development which defines the institutional and legal framework which circumscribe the behaviours of men and streamlines their relationships, by which they, both individually and collectively seek to gain greater access to material things of value in the society.

According to Olowe (1995) as cited in Ogai (2003), development represents the growth or change or planned growth. He opined that the term development when prefixed (e.g. human development) or suffixed (e.g. development studies), applies to perspectives such as social development, economic development, political development, etc. Ogai also cited Montgomery and Siffin (1996) to have conceived the term development as an aspect of change that is desirable, broadly predicted or planned and administered or at least influenced by governmental action.

Dandaura (1999) further illuminated the concept of development by discussing the ideological bi-polarity that emerged in the attempt of arriving at a common definition for it. According to him, the first school of thought defines the concept from a purely economic perspective that is measured in terms of increase in per capita income and Gross National Product (GNP). The second school of thought on the other hand, perceives development as a complex social process that is dependent on man's efforts to understand and take total control of his environment. He went further to enumerate the components of the environment as including economic, social, political, and cultural realities within which man finds himself.

Another definition of development was given by Colletta (1980), as cited in Dandaura (1999: 94), who said, "Development can be defined as a process of positive socio economic change in the quality and level of human existence which is aimed at raising the standard of living, quality of life and human dignity." In this definition, the state of human existence takes the center stage. Man is seen as the subject of the developmental process rather than just a recipient. Also, human life is seen to be the ultimate measure of the degree of development, that is, the extent or the degree of development in any society can be measured in terms of how much positive socio-economic changes have occurred thereby leading to an increase in the standard of living, quality of life and human dignity.

Development originates from man. This is so because it is the need for a better standard of human living (e.g. better accommodation, good roads and hospitals) that engendered the quest for a

better state of existence, which is leading to development. Development can therefore be seen as the answer to human questions on how to add value to life. Man initiated the idea of development and is himself a major agent of the same. Hence, development can be described in terms of the increase in the beneficial elements that result in a positive change in the condition of man's existence. It involves man, taking control of his environment so that he can drive those elements that are salient to his comfort rather than the elements driving him.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development, just as the name implies, is anchored on the need to build for the future. Its most significant attribute is its focus on the future whereby everything that is done in the present is executed in such a way that it does not jeopardize the quality of existence that the coming generations will experience. This is perhaps the most selfless stance ever taken by humanity; that is, advocating the kind of development that does not only meet the needs of the present, but is committed to ensuring that the quality achieved is passed on to the next generation. It also aims at giving them the opportunity to further advance that quality to meet their particular needs.

Sustainable development, like the concept of development, has been severally defined. However, we shall adopt in this study the most commonly cited one that was taken out of the report commissioned by the United Nations, titled "Our Common Future", and also known as the Brunoltland Report. The Brunoltland Commission was formally known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), but later came to be known by the name of its chair, Gro Harlem Brunoltland. The commission was convened by the United Nations in respect of the 1983 General Assembly Resolution A/38/161—"Processes of the Environmental Perspective to the year 2000 and Beyond." In the report, sustainable development was defined as the development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Wikipedia 2007).

Sustainable development can also be explained as a process rather than an end goal. This process requires constant evaluation and analysis of the emerging trends in the discuss so as to take the study of sustainable development to the next level. In analysing the knowledge available, alternative ideas must be allowed to gain expression. That is, if two alternative ideas can adequately satisfy the

same need, but one provides a better solution relative to sustainability, the more sustainable alternative should be adopted.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can be described as a revolutionary advancement in communication, possessing possibilities far too numerous to count. It creates a "next door" effect whereby distance is completely exterminated and far reaching possibilities are brought to our reach. Cumbersome tasks in data processing, sending and receiving are simplified and reduced to the push of a button. ICT presents an experimental ground that is limited only by the imaginations and creativities of its users.

The introduction of ICT into any sphere generally engenders unprecedented levels of transformation. This assertion has been reiterated in politics, culture, education and economy to mention a few. According to Brown (2000), the development so far is just the tip of an enormous iceberg. The advanced countries are developing and using technology to enhance their competitiveness at a most alarming rate. This is more dramatically evident in ICT than in any other area. The developing countries are not excluded in this unique revolution however, because by eliminating distance and time, poor and isolated communities can also gain access to the critical information necessary for their development provided the facility is available.

The most prominent of the manifestations of ICT is the Internet. The ability of the Internet to maintain open standard for transmitting digitized data—voice, video or text from one computer to another has constituted its single most important reason for success. According to Baran (2002), the Internet is most appropriately referred to as a "network of networks" and is growing and expanding at an incredibly fast rate. These networks consist of Local Area Networks (LANs), and Wide Area Network (WANs). LANs connect two or more computers, usually ones within the same building, while WANs connect several LANs in different locations. Consequently, the Internet, being the "network of networks" serves as a connection for WANs. The Internet therefore connects every individual user to a complex network whereby information can be accessed with a total disregard for time and space.

It is almost an impossible task to specify the number of users that there are on the net. According to the research company, IDC, there were 196 million users worldwide as of 2000, meanwhile, the Computer Industry Almanac counted 349 million users at about the same year. The Internet has precipitated the growth of many institutions, whether profit-making or not. This was engendered by

the realization by such institutions that with the exponential increase in adoption of the Internet by individuals, the Internet instantly becomes their greatest opportunity to reach their target audience.

The Internet also addresses two of the major challenges faced by institutions, that is, time and money; information is disseminated to huge audiences within a short time and at minimal cost. Another benefit enjoyed by such institutions and even individuals is the acquisition of web sites, which enjoy a high degree of patronage. According to Baran (2002), by July 2000 more than two billion pages were available on the web, and since about 7.3 million new pages are added everyday, by the middle of 2001, the number would have reached 4 billion. If the progression was still applicable, the number would have reached 12 billion by the middle of 2006.

The unprecedented success of the Internet in most aspects of human endeavor, particularly economic, has therefore precipitated the incorporation of the same into the developmental process, hence the need to discuss the role of the Internet in achieving sustainable development.

The Internet and Africa's Rural Development

Consequent on the huge track record set by the Internet, it has been generally concluded that the same order of substantial success can be achieved in the area of development in rural Africa. While giving an address on the "Challenges of information and Communications Technology for Development," Mark Brown, the administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), opined that there is really no more critical question facing the developing countries today than how to face up to the challenges and opportunities presented by the information revolution, and particularly the phenomenon of the Internet (Brown 2000). According to him, the internet is the two-edged sword that is leading the process of globalization having the potential of wounding those who don't quickly enough grasp how to use it by leaving them ever further behind, but providing unprecedented benefits for those, with the courage and willingness to grasp its potential to drive change.

According to a paper by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Internet brings new information resources and can open up new communication channels for rural communities. It presents a means for bridging the gaps between development professionals and rural people through the initiation of interaction and dialogue. They also believe that the Internet can foster new alliances and interpersonal networks together with literal and cross-sector links between organizations. Most importantly, it has the

potential of supporting mechanisms that enable the articulation and sharing of information on needs and local knowledge (Richardson 1997).

The Food and Agriculture Organization also believes that enormous benefits await rural communities when communication improves between the non-governmental organizations, governmental services, private sector entities and educational institutes that support rural development. It is believed that one of the best ways to improve communication is through the use of the Internet. This, FAO further justified by referring to the Internet's capacity for interactive communication that engenders the exchange of ideas. According to Richardson (1997), FAO believes that an integrated approach to the expansion of Internet services will promote the necessary, but often-neglected horizontal communication between the rural communities and the agencies linked to rural development.

Challenges of the Use of Internet for Rural Communication in Africa

While enumerating the potentials of cross-fertilization of ideas between the rural communities and the development agencies, which is to engender sustainable rural development, FAO stated some benefits of the information flow. Among those benefits are that, there will be increased efficiency in the use of development resources, there will be less duplication of activities, there will be a reduction in the cost, and global access to information and human resources will be made possible. However, they were quick to state that none of these benefits is guaranteed by the technological attributes of the Internet. According to them, those objectives are realized when people work together to make the most of a *decentralized* and *accessible* communication tool.

From the above statement, it becomes obvious that the Internet is hardly the communication tool for achieving sustainable rural development in Africa, at least not at present. This is crystallized in the fact that the communication tool needed for development in such areas must be decentralized and accessible, while it is obvious that the Internet in rural Africa is neither decentralized nor accessible. To start with, most rural areas in Africa are still not reached by the technological advancement enjoyed by some other parts of the world. Hence if Internet service exists in those areas at all, it will only be limited to a very small segment thereby making it centralized and inaccessible to all. According to Brown (2002: 1), "...cities for example, Tokyo—still has more telephones than all of Africa, where the primary needs of the poor are still the essentials of food, shelter

and basic healthcare..." Even if we claim that Brown may not be accurate in his assessment of the development in Africa, we still know that to a large extent, the needs in Africa are still predominantly basic.

The following are some of the factors that militate against the effectiveness of the Internet as a rural development communication tool.

Lack of Basic Infrastructures

The most important factor militating against the effectiveness of the Internet in rural Africa is the unavailability of necessary infrastructures. When the needed infrastructures are not available, it will be impossible for the Internet to be effectively used as a development communication medium. One of the major infrastructures that is not available is electricity. In some parts of Africa, electricity supply is not constant. For instance, in recent times in Nigeria, even in major cities nationwide, electricity supply has become so bad that everything that relies on it seems to be at a standstill. If major cities in Nigeria do not enjoy constant power supply, how much less the rural communities? Since the use of the Internet is dependent on the availability of electricity, and this electricity is not available, it is therefore obvious that the use of the Internet as a development communication tool may not be practicable in the rural areas. This fact was collaborated by Adam (2007) when he opined that though the impact of the Internet revolution is tremendous, the existing infrastructure poses a major problem in the introduction and diffusion of new technologies for Internet usage.

Accessibility

The most basic facility needed for accessing the internet is the computer. It is absolutely unrealistic for us to expect that rural dwellers will possess personal computers. Hence, the only option open to them is cyber cafes; and these are also generally not available in such areas. Because of this limitation, it is difficult to reach the rural dwellers through the Internet, thereby making it unsuitable for rural developmental communication. Also, according to Oyeyinka and Lai (2003), the teledensity of Africa is about one telephone for every 200 individuals. Hence, the lack of access to principal facilities presents critical barriers to Internet usage in Africa.

Lack of Computer Literacy

To be able to access information on the net, the user must be computer literate. This is so because the navigation on the web requires at least some level of proficiency on the computer. Most rural

dwellers have never come in contact with the computer; therefore making it impossible for them to use the Internet even if the facilities were available. This is in contrast with the "old media" such as the radio, which does not require any special skill for its information to be accessed. Hence, for the Internet to be successfully used as a tool for development communication, the rural dwellers must first be trained in the use of computers. This will indeed be an up-hill task because most rural dwellers are still concerned about the basic necessities of life and may not be willing to undergo the training since it wouldn't have any immediate effect on their standard of living.

Internet Uses

It is very important for us consider what the Internet is used for by different people. Let us take the cities where Internet services are available for instance, the larger percentage of Internet users, apart from those who use it for work-related matters (e.g. business people, academics, communication experts, etc), are youths. It has been observed that a larger percentage of activities performed by these youths on the net include chatting and sending e-mails rather than browsing for information. This factor therefore crystallizes the fact that the Internet can be used (and is being largely used) for reasons other than to seek for information. This has the potential of undermining the effect of the Internet as a development communication tool. If eventually the Internet becomes very much available in the rural area, there is still no guarantee that it will be accessed for developmental purposes by the rural targets.

Cost of Internet Connection

Although one of the attributes normally accorded to the Internet is that it is a cheap means of communication, it is still relatively expensive in developing countries. The cost of patronizing a service provider is quite high, so also is the cost of online time. For instance in Nigeria, home usage of the Internet is not too common except among the rich and business people. Another category of people who enjoy the use of the Internet are those who have access through organizational connection. Apart from these categories, majority of the other Internet users cannot spend much time on the Net because of the cost. The cost of browsing tickets vary—they range from 10 minutes to 1 hour with the minimum cost in the cheapest cafes being about ₦100. After the expiration of the allotted time, the user will have to buy another ticket. Cumulatively therefore, it may be discovered that the Internet is the most expensive medium of communication. Hence, such an expensive medium of communication

cannot be relied upon as a rural development communication tool in societies where people are still in need of the basic necessities of life.

Lack of Enlightenment

Another major obstacle that will be encountered in a bid to utilize the Internet for development purposes in rural Africa is that the people are not enlightened in the subject. Most rural dwellers have not been exposed to the Internet thereby making them oblivious of what it has to offer. To be able to use the Internet for development communication in the rural areas therefore, enlightenment programmes must first be mounted to properly expose the people to it. In that case, Internet itself will become a target for development rather than an instrument of development.

Critical Observation

According to Oyeyinka and Lai (2003), estimates show that the use of the Internet in Africa lags behind that of other regions. In fact, the regional distribution of Internet users as at the first quarter of 2002 shows that out of the global figure of 580.78 million users, Africa only supplied 6.31 million—about one percent of the world total. The global figure of Internet users has grown since 2003 to 694 million as at 2006. According to Comscore Network while launching the Comscore World Metrix on the 4th of May, 2006, 694 million people currently use the Internet worldwide. The Comscore World Metrix, according to the organization, is the first true estimate of global online audience size and behaviour, an activity of the world's largest online behavioural research panel. Hence, the 694 million internet users make up about 14% of the world's total population.

The Internet Users Association stated that by March 31, 2007, there are 33,334,800 Internet users in Africa out of the 933,448,292 estimated population for Africa. The association also said that the Internet Penetration Rate in Africa is 3.6%. There is no doubt that the growth in the number of Internet users in Africa from 6.31 million in 2003 to 33,334,800 in 2007 has been dramatic. Nevertheless, if we consider the Penetration Rate as at 2007 which is just 3.6%, it becomes obvious that Africa is still behind in the adoption of the Internet. This therefore painfully crystallizes the fact that the use of the Internet as a developmental tool in rural Africa may not even be as near as anticipated.

For the Internet to become a developmental tool in the nearest future, the government of African countries should take deliberate steps to encourage its use. According to Adam (2007), the major problems are not technical but managerial, political, cultural, and also

lack of infrastructure. These problems must be addressed for Africa to take its place among other nations in the use of the Internet. The government should embark on projects targeted at making the Internet accessible not only in the urban centers, but also in the rural areas.

It is also very important that non-governmental organizations be involved in this project so as to make its effect profound. Enlightenment programmes on computer appreciation should be mounted to train people. Rural dwellers should also be trained, only that their basic needs must be attended to first. It is also necessary to enlighten youths on the informative potentials of the Internet and not just the entertainment capabilities. To arrive at a more profound and sustainable use of the Internet therefore, the government should set up a high-powered committee to look into the importance, use, and the misuse of the Internet so that it can be firstly developed, and later channelled towards the development of the African community.

Conclusion

The Internet is the major driver of the globalized world. It has also been claimed to have the immense ability to change societies. However, the Internet is at present not the best development communication tool to use to address the developmental problems in the rural areas in Africa. Before we can arrive at the point where the Internet can effectively contribute to the developmental process rather than obstruct it, some preconditions must have been met such as the provision of needed infrastructures, provision of subsidized Internet subscription, mounting of enlightenment programmes, and training of rural dwellers in computer know-how, among others. Without this, it will be discovered that the use of the Internet will become a developmental agenda in itself rather than a development facilitator.

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