

Information for Rural Communities: A Solution for Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta

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Introduction

Information plays an important role in almost every human activity. Its values in the development process have been a topic of extensive discussion. Information dissemination and accessibility have reduced the world to a global village. Africa, like the rest of the world, is experiencing change in all aspects of life: from basic cultural values to technology, which has changed not only the mode of communication, but the concept of time. In Africa, there are different methods of providing information for the people. These are the traditional African methods and the foreign or organizational methods.

Objectives

This paper highlights the importance of traditional African methods of providing information to rural dwellers for sustainable economic, political, communal, and social development.

Background to the Study

Bayelsa state came into being on 1st October 1996, when it was created from the old Rivers State. It is located in the major oil and natural gas producing area of the Niger Delta. The name Bayelsa was derived from the three acronyms BALGA for Brass Local Government Area, YELGA for Yenagoa Local Government Area and SALGA for Sagbama Local Government Area (Alagoa, 1999).

Initially divided into eight local government areas, today it has thirty two localities, twenty-four of them created by the state government by December 1999. Bayelsa has a total land area of 21,110 square kilometers. It is bounded on the east and west by Rivers and Delta States and on the south by the Atlantic Ocean (Adeshola, 2005). It has a population of about four million people, placing it among the most populated states of the federation (Farnsworth, Galsworthy & Kolasinski 2000). The capital of the state is Yenagoa.

Bayelsa State is composed of rural communities. The State capital, Yenagoa, and major cities like Nembe, Amassoma, Odi, Kaiama, Sagbama, and Brass still exhibit features of true rural communities. Activities of town criers, diviners, and others still thrive in a state where a radio and television station situated in the capital covers the entire state. There is a public library in the state capital. This library is of little or no importance to rural dwellers and its host community.

Information Behaviour in Traditional Societies

People who are accustomed to an oral tradition can better relate to information exchanged in the way they understand. Meyer (2000, 2003) identifies communication mechanisms and information seeking behaviour typical of people used to an oral tradition:

- In an oral culture, information is stored in people's memories. Therefore, people with good memories play a vital role in storing and transferring information, and the death of a knowledgeable person may lead to valuable information being lost.
- The manner in which information is communicated will largely determine whether the community will react to it or not. For example, if information is not offered in metaphorical speech or demonstrated in a way people are used to, they will not be able to understand it and it will not make any impression on them.
- Phrasing and repetition are used to ensure that critical expressions are stored in the memory. Phrasing provides the basis for an agreed upon interpretation, which may go beyond what was actually said.
- A particular form of language delivered in a special way is employed in specialised contexts for particular purposes.
- Authority structures play a vital role in storing and transferring information, the implication being that if authorities are not familiar with a particular type of outside information, the information will not easily be sanctioned, and thus will not easily be accepted by the group.
- In cultures with an oral tradition, information is exchanged face to face. Information cannot be transmitted over long distances. Often, information remains within the borders of a particular community. Unless people of different communities interact, information created in other communities will remain inaccessible.
- Stories and myths tend to be experiential that is, based on events familiar to the listener or storyteller.
- Mnemonic aids such as rhymes are widely used to make the oral transfer of information more reliable.
- Recipe-like patterns or stereotypical methods of expression are also very common. Unnecessary repetition may be used to ensure that information is conveyed correctly, and in detail.

Information in Rural Development

To make information useful in development, it is important to take a closer look at the information seeking behaviour of rural people used to the oral tradition. They may have their own particular way of handling information that is closely related to their social and cultural background (Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2000) discusses research on information use by rural people. In a study of a group of traditional farmers producing food for their own consumption, incoming information was better understood and accepted when the messages were communicated in a way which they could identify. They exchanged information using "indigenous communication mechanisms," and most members had little exposure to ways of communicating that are based primarily on literacy. The situation described by Meyer (2000) is typical of the rural and urban communities of Bayelsa State.

Traditional African Methods

In Africa, information is viewed as a vital resource for uplift and development of the people both in rural and urban dwellings. Boon (1992) and Camble (1994) note that an absence of information may impede development. Traditional indicators are still widely used as modes of forecasting and land use management. The indicators are mostly local and are well understood in communities (Okoola, 1996). These traditional indicators include: plants, birds, insects (bees, butterfly, red ants, termites), stars, hill shadows, moon, winds (direction, strength, and time of starting and ending), clouds (position and movement), lightning (location and pattern), springs and swamps, cowries, and so on.

Apart from the traditional indicators, there are other ways in which information is provided. Most notable is the oral communication pattern. In almost all rural communities, town criers and their activities are noticeable. They use wooden or metal gongs or drums to stir up the people and deliver their messages orally. Another means of oral provision of information is holding meetings. Most villages and towns have squares where the people meet to discuss issues and make decisions. Through this means the leaders provide information for their well being and development. The African rural population is mostly illiterate, and they get information this way at no cost. This oral exchange of information indicates that rural dwellers may be able to relate to information exchanged in the way they are accustomed to (Meyer, 2005). This is still the situation in both urban and rural communities of Bayelsa State.

In an oral culture, information is stored in people's memories and people with good memories play a vital role in storing and transferring information. The death of a knowledgeable person may lead to valuable information being lost (Meyer, 2005). Juju priests, traditional rulers, chief priest, soothsayers, village chiefs and elders, story tellers, and diviners play key roles as information providers in the African context.

The colonization of Africa brought with it a different or alien ways of providing information in the continent, but the traditional ways are still strongly adhered to by the people, as Alegbeleye (1998) notes, "the library and its services are not indigenous to Africa, they were like the ubiquitous salon car, the tractor or the radio imported as most part of the continent became colonized." He goes on to say that "the simple and uncomplicated societies of Africa into which libraries were introduced in the beginning of the century had depended on oral communication for the transmission of knowledge and information essential to the efficient conduct of their affairs for centuries. Abundant literature has shown that elders of some ethnic groups in Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana base their judicial decisions upon a body of tribal precedents transmitted solely by the word of mouth." Sturges and Neill (1993) note rightly that, "within Africa's oral medium, there existed a treasure-trove of knowledge which could contribute to the solution of many of the continent's persistent problems. The book and the print when they came did not alter the essentially oral aural character of communication in most parts of the continent." Meyer (2000) went further to say that "indigenous communication mechanisms were almost the only means by which particular groups exchange information. Most members of the group had hardly, if ever, been exposed to modern society, whose way of communication is based primarily on literacy."

Paradigm Shift and the Bayelsa Situation

Colonialism brought with it foreign ways of information provision and dissemination, which were beneficial to the continent in many ways. Electricity brought remarkable change in the way town criers go about their business. Many rural communities of the State has no electricity, and electric power generators (one man career of between N10,000.00 to N12,000.00 or about a \$100) serve as substitute. A microphone in a central position (radio house) and loudspeakers placed in different locations in the communities ensure that town criers cover a wider range without moving from their positions. Matters handled and settled by traditional courts, council of elders, and chiefs are communicated to the entire community. A loser in a case must have to pay to the radio house operator (town crier) a fee for the decisions reached to be announced to the entire community. Obituaries, gatherings, meetings, kings' (Ebenana-owei and Amanana-owei) messages and other announcements are disseminated through this medium. Notable communities where these loudspeakers can easily be seen are Amassoma in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, Ogobri in Sagbama Local Government Area and Agudama community in Yenagoa Local Government Area.

Outside the oral tradition, information is medium dependent and must be packaged in order to be used. The receivers of the information must know how to use that particular format, or the information will be inaccessible and useless (Meyer, 2005). Colonialists introduced print and non-print (books, newspapers, radio, television and other sound system) media as means of communicating with or informing the populace. Right now, one of the major providers of information is the library, where individuals can go to read and get informed from books. Libraries were established in major cities and

institutions in Africa. Reading books for educational, recreational, and other purposes was brought about by writers, printers, and publishers, who became information providers. Although librarians and libraries are on the front lines in the process of providing access to information, they are not the only ones involved. Authors of publications (or other information media), publishers, booksellers, and vendors are all important in accessing information.

This method of information provision has not been useful to rural communities. Alegbeleye (1998) states that “colonial powers came to a continent that had indigenous knowledge systems communicated through the oral/aural mode. It is clear from available research and from the experience of library professionals that:

1. rural communities have information needs that are not satisfied by existing library services
2. information needs differ from one locality to another depending on existing socio-economic and political conditions
3. information must be directly relevant to the lives of the people if it is to be used
4. information transfer must simulate existing indigenous mode of communicating information.”

The Government of Bayelsa State stated in September 2008 that the state government would henceforth use town criers to disseminate government information to rural communities, although the State radio and television stations had appropriate equipment for their broadcasts. To achieve the aspirations of the present state government to get across to the majority of the rural dwellers, the government decided employ town criers. Mchombu (1995) describes the important positive relationship between information and development. Wakelin and Simelane (1995) and (Adimorah, 1995) make similar points about this positive relationship. Information is a critical resource for people and both rural and urban areas (Mazie and Ghelfi, 1995). However, the lack of information provision in rural environments remains a problem, which is why the Bayelsa State Government has taken this bold step in the right direction.

Conclusion

Information dissemination methods that are based on traditional definitions of literacy may not work well for rural dwellers, who are used to an oral tradition. In providing information for Africa, information providers should assess and recognize their target groups and devise the best means to disseminate meaningful information for sustainable development to such groups. Traditional methods are still effective, and providers use foreign media to boost rural information dissemination as well. Most information providers use ICT facilities to provide much needed information for target groups all over the continent.

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