

# Overcoming the Challenges to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria Through the Development Communication Paradigm

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## Abstract

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) championed by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, are global concerted effort to bring about positive change in all member countries by 2030. Achieving the SDGs in Nigeria faces numerous challenges, this paper explores the potential of the development communication paradigm as a strategic approach to overcome these challenges. Development communication paradigm offers a pathway to mobilise development recipients, development communicators as well as stakeholders to foster inclusive, hence sustainable development by leveraging both modern communication technologies and traditional media. The study examines strategies to leverage the mass media as a tool for communicating development as well as facilitating public discourse to address development challenges. Undoubtedly, a robust development communication framework can significantly contribute to achieving the SDGs in Nigeria by fostering a better informed, actively engaged, and resilient communities. The paper concludes with recommendations for utilising the mass media in driving sustainable development in Nigeria.

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## **Background to the Study**

As the world was nearing the end of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, existential realities across the globe pointed to the need for successor to the MDGs to consolidate the gains and continue the push to improve the standard of living, access to healthcare, literacy as well as safeguarding the planet among others. This gave birth to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 interconnected global goals established by the United Nations in 2015, designed to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030. These goals address the global challenges, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice (United Nations, 2015). Moreover, each SDG is broken down into specific targets and indicators to measure progress. Targets are specific, measurable objectives within each goal. For example, Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) has targets such as ensuring food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture among others. While indicators are metrics used to monitor and evaluate progress towards each target. For instance, to measure progress on sustainable agriculture one should observe the level of agricultural productivity in a location. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021).

Summarily, The SDGs have a total of 169 targets and 232 measurable indicators. The following are the 17 SDGs:

1. No Poverty (Goal 1): End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. Zero Hunger (Goal 2): End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. Good Health and Well-being (Goal 3): Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. Quality Education (Goal 4): Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. Gender Equality (Goal 5): Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. Clean Water and Sanitation (Goal 6): Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. Affordable and Clean Energy (Goal 7): Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 8): Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (Goal 9): Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
10. Reduced Inequalities (Goal 10): Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities (Goal 11): Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
12. Responsible Consumption and Production (Goal 12): Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. Climate Action (Goal 13): Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

14. Life Below Water (Goal 14): Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. Life on Land (Goal 15): Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (Goal 16): Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. Partnerships for the Goals (Goal 17): Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

These goals and targets are monitored through a global framework that involves regular data collection, reporting, and review processes to ensure accountability and transparency in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Additionally, since 2016 up to date the UN secretary general presents an annual SDG progress report to keep the world abreast on progress made, also highlighting areas of improvement to meet up with the 2030 SDGs deadline.

Development communication on the other hand offers a pathway to mobilise development recipients, development communicators as well as stakeholders to foster inclusive, hence sustainable development. By leveraging modern communication technologies and traditional media, this approach can be adopted to provide information for which there is a need, facilitate communication, dialogue and agenda setting, knowledge exchange, skills acquisition as well as behavioural change necessary for achieving the sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

### **What is Development?**

For Dissanayake in Moemeka (2000) development is the process of social change which has as its goal the improvement in the quality of life of all or the majority of the people in a given society without causing harm to the natural and cultural environment in which they exist and which seeks to involve the generality of people, making them masters of their destiny. The short-term and long-term goal of development is to bring about desired positive change that is directed towards increased knowledge and skills, growth of new consciousness, expansion of the human mind, the upliftment of the human spirit and the fusion of human confidence (Moemeka, 1999).

Similarly, the Commission on Environment and Development in Abdul Qadir (2005) defined sustainable development as “a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 154). This means that genuine development takes care of the present without jeopardising the future. It is worthy to note that Development is an endeavour that requires all hands to be on deck. Development communication paradigm takes a holistic approach and occupies center stage in development activities to ensure each and every one is carried along, on the same page and peculiar skills and expertise are maximised efficiently to achieve the SDGs.

### **Development Communication: A Conceptual Clarification**

Development communication, also known as DevCom, is an interdisciplinary paradigm that involves the strategic use of communication processes, tools, and techniques to facilitate social and economic development. This paradigm emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century alongside global development efforts. Over time, the paradigm has shifted from a top-down, diffusion model to “more inclusive, participatory frameworks that emphasise the involvement of target populations in the development process” (Servaes, 1999, P. 56). Moemeka (2000) defines development communication as “the use of communication techniques, technology, principles and practices in the development process” (p. 12). Therefore, simply put, development communication is the application of the principles and practices of exchange of ideas towards the achievement of development objectives. Moreover, development communication is an attempt to create conducive atmosphere for genuine dialogue that would ensure that the members of the benefitting social system understand the rationale for the development programs, accept the need for change and fully participate in the planning and execution of the development programs (Moemeka, 2000). Development communication paradigm is simply an attempt to use communication effectively in the development process.

As Servaes (2008) explains, “development communication is the sharing of knowledge aimed at reaching a consensus for action that takes into account interests, needs, and capacities of all concerned” (p. 14). Mefalopulos (2008) adds that development communication “encompasses a variety of approaches, including behaviour change communication, participatory communication, and advocacy” (p. 24), all of which aim to foster social change. For Moemeka (2000) the ultimate aim of development communication paradigm is to create an environment in which development recipients are willing to participate in the discussions on planning and execution of development projects. The goal is “to utilise communication effectively to ensure proper understanding of issues related to development and deliberate extensively on means to achieve development goals and meet targets” (Moemeka, 2000, p. 13).

As seen from the foregoing, development communication focuses on the role of communication in achieving development objectives. It makes use of various communication strategies, including mass media, interpersonal communication, and digital platforms, to inform, educate, and mobilise individuals and communities toward positive social change. The ultimate goal is to enhance the quality of life and promote sustainable development. However, most often than not, information is mistaken with communication and vice-versa. Some consider both to be one and same, hence use the two interchangeably. For these kinds of people, Moemeka (2000) says communication is nothing more than what is heard, read and seen in the mediums of communication. As a result, they fail to appreciate the significance of communication in human life and also fail to contemplate the role of communication in the upliftment of conditions of living.

It is important, before we go any further, to distinguish between information and communication. Information is simply facts and figures while communication is

discussing and exchanging ideas and opinions on those facts and figures (Moemeka, 2000). The development communication paradigm fuses both effectively into development strategies and execution. Information dissemination involves the distribution of accurate and relevant information to raise awareness about development issues. Effective information dissemination is crucial for ensuring that communities are well-informed and can make decisions that improve their well-being (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). While communication for development involves listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change (World Health Organization, 2012).

From the foregoing, we understand that Information is content or data that is disseminated, while communication is the process by which this content is exchanged and interpreted. Both are essential in the flow of knowledge, skills and understanding in human interactions necessary for attaining the SDGs. The principal function of communication in the developing world as Moemeka (2000) explained is to “educate with a view to raising the aspirations of the people in the right direction, generating among them the willingness to work in order to improve their conditions, motivating them to action and guiding and directing their activities to successful ends” (p. 139). For these population, communication is not just exchange of ideas and opinions; it is also a question of relationships and knowledge acquisition; and it has to be concerned with relevant content, suitable style of presentation, timing, rapport, access, participation and a cordial balance between modern and traditional systems (Moemeka, 2000). The development communication paradigm stresses the need for collaborative and cooperative effort and is employed by a diverse range of actors, including governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and their likes. It is used in various sectors and has yielded remarkable results.

### **Development Media Theory as Theoretical Framework for Development Communication Paradigm.**

Development Media Theory is a normative theory formulated in the 1980s by Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl, this theory asserts that the media in developing countries, such as Nigeria, should play an active role in promoting social, economic, and political progress (McQuail, 1987). It advocates for media to support government initiatives, educate the public, and facilitate social change. The theory posits that media should prioritise content that aligns with national goals, such as economic growth, health awareness, and cultural development. As McQuail (1987) notes, the primary aim is to use media as a tool for modernisation and nation-building. The media is therefore, seen as a tool for educating the public and fostering modernisation, which is crucial for achievement of the SDGs and ultimately development.

Development media theory advocates that the mass media in a developing country should support national development. Effective information dissemination is crucial for ensuring that communities are well-informed and can make decisions that improve their well-being (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). Additionally, Communication for development

involves listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change (World Health Organization, 2012). By prioritising programs on issues like food security, access to healthcare, and literacy, the media can inform and educate the masses, such effort will prompt the changes that could lead to realisation of critical SDGs such as hunger (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4) and promote peace and justice (SDG 16).

A central tenet of Development Media Theory is its emphasis on participatory development through dialogue and collaboration. Participatory communication seeks to involve communities in the decision-making process. It acknowledges the importance of local knowledge and cultural context in shaping development outcomes. Coombs and Ahmed in Moemeka (2000) have pointed out that, for any development to be relevantly meaningful to a people, and therefore, have any hope of success it must begin with the people themselves, in their attitude towards change. In their aspiration for improvement and, above all, in how they perceive themselves and their own inherent power to better themselves individually and collectively. The Nigerian mass media can offer platform for marginalised groups such as women, youths, rural communities and people with disabilities which can facilitate the achievement of the SDGs such as goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), goal 10 (reduced inequalities), and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Moreover, Development Media Theory also spotlights the media's role in advocating and influencing policies and public opinion by focusing on issues for agenda setting and discourse. Effective advocacy can lead to policy changes that support development goals, such as improved access to education or healthcare (Servaes, 2008). In Nigeria, journalists, activists, stakeholders and influencers among others can use the media can advocate for the integration of SDGs into national policy agendas. For example, continuous media coverage and advocacy on improving healthcare systems (SDG 3) and ensuring access to clean water (SDG 6) can influence government decisions on budget allocations and development priorities (Bello & Abubakar, 2018).

Furthermore, the evolution of digital media is essential for accelerating progress towards the achievement SDGs in Nigeria. Social media, online platforms, and mobile technologies provide opportunities for widespread awareness and engagement with SDG issues (Manyozo, 2012). According to Reuters (2024) report, Nigeria has a 73% internet penetration rate for its projected population of 211 million people, Additionally, Nigeria benefits from relatively low data charges, ranking 31st on a recent global list of mobile data pricing across 237 countries (Statista, 2024).

With Nigeria's increasing internet and mobile penetration, digital platforms can be leveraged to amplify minority voices, mobilize citizens, disseminate information and communicate in real-time. For instance, social media campaigns promoting environmental conservation or health interventions can engage Nigeria's youth population, driving grassroots support for the SDGs (Bello & Abubakar, 2018).

In a nutshell, Development Media Theory is important in understanding how Nigeria can address the challenges of achieving the SDGs through strategic media use. The theory emphasizes the media's role in not only informing the public but also actively contributing to national development through public awareness, holding leaders accountable, and advocating for sustainable policies. By applying the principles of this theory, the Nigerian media can become a leading figure in advancing progress toward the SDGs regardless existing challenges.

### **Communication Planning for SDGs**

Communication planning is “the orderly and systematic development of a strategy or strategies for the effective implementation of a program of communication in relation to the solution to human problems” (Moemeka, 2000, p. 102). Here attempt to answer question such as what to say, to whom, when, where and how, through which medium and by who. What to say means the message, to whom refers to the development recipients, when is the timing, how is the means through the message will be disseminated, through which medium is the communication or message carrier and by who is the sender.

For effective implementation of the SDGs, development agents must determine which media suits which goal, what message is appropriate and effective to which audience, which medium is best to reach which recipients and who is the appropriate carrier of the message. Knowledge of the demography of a social system, literacy rate, social status, cultural beliefs and traditions as well as the collective and individual economic strength of the people living in a recipient community determines the choice of media to be adopted for information and communication, because these peculiarities, among other things determines the media one is exposed to. Similarly, knowledge of the characteristics of a society is necessary to enable development agents plan appropriately and execute effectively. The pyramid provided by Moemeka (2000) helps us to understand the structure of a society in a developing world such as Nigeria. The hierarchical pyramid places the urban segment which consists of a very small elite at the top, followed by the sub-urban segment inhabited by semi-educated individuals and finally at the bottom of the pyramid is the rural segment which is inhabited by the majority of the people. Therefore, we can understand that whereas urban areas are dwellings for the middle class and a coterie of elite at the zenith, the sub-urban areas are inhabited by a mostly fairly educated and low skilled individuals, while the rural areas are the epicenter of tradition with little or no presence of modernity and social amenities. Taking all these into account will enable development agents to plan effectively and execute efficiently.

### **Conclusion**

Development communication paradigm is an essential tool in the global effort to achieve sustainable development goals. By leveraging the power of the Nigerian mass media, development practitioners can approach complex social issues, promote behavioural and attitudinal change, foster inclusive dialogue, empower marginalised groups, facilitate and enhance community participation, promote equitable access to resources, and

mobilise collective action towards achieving the SDGs. In summary, the SDGs aim to initiate transformations such as moving from abject poverty to sufficiency, dependency to self-reliance, disease to health, illiteracy to literacy, sexism to gender equality, lack to abundance, economic struggle to prosperity, environmentally harmful practices to conservation efforts, retrogressive attitudes to progressive ones, ethnocentrism to cultural relativism, injustice to justice and violence to peace. The potential of the development communication paradigm, when effectively planned and executed, can significantly drive sustainable development and tackle challenges to achieving the SDGs in Nigeria. It is important to recognise, however, that no matter how effectively mass media is used for development, it cannot replace other essential tools, resources and interventions. As Moemeka (2000) noted, “the mass media should be understood as supportive rather than causative of development” (p.174).

### **Recommendations**

The following have been recommended to overcome challenges in achieving the SDGs in Nigeria.

#### **1. Adoption of multimedia approach in communication and information dissemination**

Communities are diverse and factors such as individual preference, literacy levels, social status, and economic strength influence the medium to which one is exposed. Since not everyone has access to same medium, a single media approach cannot reach all audience effectively. In this context, a one-size-fits-all is inadequate. Adopting a multimedia approach increases the likelihood of reaching broader and diverse population. Furthermore, certain SDGs are better communicated through specific media. For Instance, goal 13, which call for urgent climate action to combat climate change and its impact, can be effectively communicated through visual media. Images of damages caused by flood, documentaries explaining causal relationship between deforestation and desertification, threats posed to wildlife by indiscriminate bush burning, and the pollution caused by inappropriate waste disposal can graphically illustrate consequences of human actions to the planet. In this context, visual media can achieve significantly better outcomes than audio-based media alone could.

#### **2. Personalisation of SDGs Messages**

In addition to disseminating SDG messages across multiple communication platforms, it is essential that these messages are personalised to align with the socio-cultural context of different communities. For instance, goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls should be communicated differently to reflect specific needs of various communities. When communicating this goal to urban dwellers, the focus should be on advocating for increased opportunities for women and young girls in government, appointments to political offices, and dismantling systemic barriers that hinder their active participation in politics and entrepreneurship. In contrast, messages for rural inhabitants should emphasise on girl child education, discouraging forced



marriage, and including women in decision-making processes.

**3. Decentralisation of the Mass Media**

Decentralisation of the media can create more opportunities for access to mass media infrastructure and participation among the least reported segments of society. Those who are mostly disregarded in news coverage or lack means to express their views and opinions on various important issues affecting them personally or communally. Under-reported groups include women, youth, people with disabilities as well as people living in slums and rural areas. Centralised media present significant challenge preventing journalist fulfilling their developmental role and audience from active participation. Media reform is necessary to ensure that the media can effectively fulfil its roles in education and advocacy for SDGs.

**4. Partnership with Media Organisations**

Collaborating with Nigerian media organisations and practitioners can provide greater visibility and wider reach. Continuous media content on SDGs can set the agenda for open discussions that could lead to action. Additionally, the media can serve as a bridge for fostering understanding, facilitating skills and knowledge transfer, and ultimately aiding in the achievement of the SDGs.

**5. Adoption of Development Journalism and Capacity Building for Practitioners**

Among the social responsibilities of the mass media is to contribute significantly to development efforts of the society in which they operate. Development journalism plays an essential role in highlighting the issues affecting communities, and such reportage can inspire action, influence behavioural change and spark aspirations for positive transformation (Nyamjoh, 2005). Nigerian media organisations should dedicate special sections specifically for SDGs. These could include features, columns or programmes. Reporting on issues affecting communities can spur action, inspire behavioural change, and kindle aspirations. Hence, Nigerian media organisations should establish dedicated pages and programmes that educate the masses about SDGs and encourage citizen participation in achieving these goals.

**6. Continuous Learning and Education**

Sustainable development is not a one-off effort; therefore, learning about communities and educating the public on SDGs must be continues. In Nigeria, investing in training journalists in development reporting, improving infrastructure, and promoting media independence are crucial for the media to act as a catalyst for achieving the SDGs (Ojebode, 2019).

**7. Use of Indigenous Languages for Communication**

The use of indigenous languages plays a crucial role in ensuring that messages are understood accurately without distortion. Nelson Mandela's words resonate deeply in this context: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart". Communication in

local languages is important for fostering emotional connection, inspiring hope, and mobilising communities to take meaningful action towards achieving the SDGs.

**8. Utilising Local Resources and Indigenous Solutions in the Implementation of SDGs** This is strongly encouraged whenever feasible. Leveraging locally sourced materials and culturally relevant strategies can enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of development initiatives, as they are often more cost-effective and better aligned with community needs and environmental conditions (Smith & Jones, 2019).

**9. Engaging all Stakeholders Across Various Segments of Society**

As stated earlier, development communication paradigm emphasises the need for collaborative and cooperative efforts and involves a diverse range of actors. This is essential for the successful implementation of the SDGs. Communities must harness the exuberance and innovation of the youth, the wisdom and experience of the elderly, the expertise of the technocrats, and the authority of people in power. Moreover, the influence of community leaders, the respect commanded by religious figures, the technical tools of engineers, the knowledge of healthcare professionals, and the legal acumen of judges are equally important. In essence, all hands must be on deck as achieving the SDGs requires collaboration at all levels, with every individual playing a role in driving progress through their respective fields (Smith & Brown, 2021).

**10. Monitoring and Evaluation**

Development and media practitioners, community leaders, and other stakeholders should monitor the progress of development projects for effective evaluation. This evaluation should take place before the commencement of a project, while the project is ongoing and after its execution. Additionally, data obtained from these evaluations provide valuable insights that can guide future planning, improve execution strategies, and enhance sustainability efforts (Mackay, 2007). The goal is to ensure the sustainability of projects long after development agents have departed.

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