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Popularization of Population Information in Africa: Issues and Approaches

by Alfred E. Opubor*

Abstract

This article disaggregates the population information, education and communication (IEC) sector into: population information which includes the technical and statistical information of awareness creation; population education through formal institutions (e.g. schools) and non-formal ones (e.g. adult education programmes); and population communication aimed at *fostering interest, creating demand and supporting population programme activities*. It describes the typology of population information end-users (information brokers) as including policy/decision makers and implementors, service providers and professionals, NGO administrators, university lecturers and researchers, community leaders, and media workers (journalists and producers). These end-users are characterized by the fact that they are non-demographers and hence the need to put in place a 'brokerage' system for translating specialist material into non-specialist information — an important aspect of popularization. The mass media are then to be used to diffuse the information so processed to target audiences. The article surveys the mass media situation in Africa and proposes ways in which they may be used to disseminate population information more effectively and accurately.

*Prof. Alfred E. Opubor is the Managing Director of Multimedia Limited, a communications consultancy firm in Lagos, Nigeria.

Vulgarisation de l'information sur la population en Afrique: Problèmes et ébauche de solutions.

Résumé

Cet article subdivise le secteur de l'information, de l'éducation et de la communication dans les sous-secteurs suivant: l'information populaire, qui comprend l'information technique et statistique sur la stimulation de la prise de conscience, l'éducation populaire à travers les institutions scolaires officialisées (les écoles) et non officialisées telles que le programme d'alphabétisation, et enfin la communication populaire qui est destinée à susciter l'intérêt, stimuler la demande et soutenir le programme d'activités populaire. Elle décrit la typologie des consommateurs ultimes (agents de l'information) qui eux-mêmes comprennent les politiciens, toutes fonctions confondues, les services fournisseurs et les professionnels, les responsables des ONG, les professeurs d'université et les chercheurs, les autorités communautaires et les fonctionnaires des médias (journalistes et réalisateurs). Les ultimes consommateurs sont caractérisés par le fait qu'ils ne sont pas démographes, d'où le besoin de mettre en place un système intermédiaire pour convertir le matériel spécialisé en une information vulgarisée, ce qui constitue un aspect important de la popularisation. Les masses médias sont alors utilisés pour diffuser l'information ainsi préparée aux audiences auxquelles elle était préconçue. Cet article passe en revue la situation des masses médias en Afrique et propose les moyens de les utiliser pour disséminer l'information populaire plus efficacement et de façon plus précise.

Introduction

Information, education and communication (IEC) are processes and activities which are basic to any programme of social change. Most development-oriented projects now acknowledge IEC as a 'sector' with planning requirements, budgetary implications, and specialized expert services, similar to those for the more 'technical' aspects of a project.

The population field has long realized the value of IEC, and given it attention in policy formulation and programme implementation. In fact, in its current global strategy, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) highlights information, education and communication activities for programmes in the African region (UNFPA 1988).

Although IEC is regarded as a 'sector' and is increasingly talked about in an integrated or consolidated manner, it is in reality three distinct and distinguishable activities, each with somewhat different objectives, target audiences, modalities of implementation, and effects. Of course, all three sub-sectors, when developed in an efficient and interdependent manner, reinforce one another in the achievement of the overall goals of institutionalizing population concepts, policies and programmes, as well as increasing the use of fertility-regulating services.

Population information 'includes the technical and statistical information that is used to create awareness of population issues among governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), communities, families and individuals' (UNFPA 1989).

Population education takes place in formal education settings such as schools and colleges, or in non-formal instructional activities involving adult learners or out-of-school youth.

Population communication 'is aimed at fostering interest, creating demand and otherwise supporting population programme activities...' (UNFPA 1989).

The differences among these overlapping and interdependent processes can be briefly stated thus: '*information* activities . . . bring facts and issues to the attention of an audience The primary aim is to provide the material to stimulate discussion In contrast, the aim of *communication* is to motivate the audience to action *Education* usually exposes an individual or an audience to learning, over a longer time than does a communication or information activity. The aim of education is to foster genuine understanding of problems and possible solutions' (UNFPA 1989).

Population information, therefore, covers a range of activities involving the creation, processing and dissemination of population-related content destined for a variety of target audiences. The content is determined largely by what professionals think the audience should know; but it is

not necessarily shaped or structured with a particular end in view. Sources of population information include demographic statistics, results of social surveys, KAP studies, general development indicators, reports on the state of the economy and social services, etc. These are usually collected and disseminated by national official agencies, (Office of Statistics, Ministry of Planning/Economic Development), or non-governmental population organizations (Population Council, Women's Council, Family Planning Association), or academic research/service institutions.

Many of such collectors of population information have working relationships with fairly stable constituencies which they service periodically, and which look to them as sources of data and analyses of development and population trends. The vehicles through which information sources and their clients relate include specialized periodic bulletins, newsletters, journals and other publications, as well as seminars, workshops, public lectures, training courses, meetings, rallies, launchings, etc. Because many of the 'clients' are also institutionalized sources of information-dissemination to their membership, usually composed of groups and individuals with specialized needs or objectives, the information may be re-packaged or recycled in a 'multiple-step' dissemination process. Therefore, population information programme managers need to be aware of the various destinations of their products, as well as the possible 'treatments' which they may undergo before reaching different categories of end users. Whether such knowledge should influence information-packaging at the source, and to what extent, is probably a matter for study, discussion, negotiation, and experimentation.

One implication of this situation, however, is that source-destination exchanges should be more deliberately built into population information diffusion programmes, and that a typology of end-users and 'information-brokers' should be developed to assist information producers in their activities.

Popularization

The end user of population information is typically one of the following:

- a policy/decision maker (in government)
- a policy implementer
- a population service provider/professional
- an NGO administrator
- a university teacher/lecturer/researcher
- a community leader/organizer, and
- a media worker (producer, journalist, editor)

The information needs of these various end-users can be expected to differ; their capacity to process, preserve and recall information will also differ.

In spite of their differences, they do have one thing in common; they are not professional demographers or population statisticians. As laypersons, their perceptions of major issues and options are bound not to be the same as those of experts. Typically also, the material which is prepared for their enlightenment has been prepared by subject-matter specialists and documentalists who are professionally qualified in the technical fields of population. How can the insights of the specialists be made relevant to the varying needs of interested lay persons? How can the subject-matter specialist convey the realities and complexities of demographic situations and consequent decision options to a concerned layperson without either distorting or trivializing the material, or 'misinforming' his audience? How can the interested non-specialist acquire a progressively more accurate picture of population issues, technologies, policy options, and relevant activities to support efforts at social mobilization or policy intervention or service delivery?

These are questions which are pertinent in practically all situations of knowledge-sharing. They are probably more critical in situations of information dissemination in which knowledge source and end-user are separated in time and space, and are connected through impersonal transmission channels.

Whatever the linkage mode between specialists and lay persons, a 'brokerage' system needs to be put in place to ensure that some measure of 'equivalent enlightenment' is achieved between specialists and lay people (Lasswell). This brokerage process or mechanism could theoretically be either a sub-function of the specialist system or an interposed autonomous function, or a special unit of the user system.¹ For practical reasons, since it is in the interest of the information provider to ensure that end-users are satisfied with the information they receive and are thus likely to use it (and pass it on), the brokerage required to 'translate' specialist material into non-specialist information should be provided and supervised by the information generator.

The 'translation' or 'transformation' of specialist material to make it accessible and acceptable to nonspecialists is one major aspect of 'popularization'. Another important aspect of 'popularization' is diffusion through channels destined to reach target audiences outside the narrow confines of self-selected professional and specialist groups. The use of the media of mass communication is almost inevitable in achieving popularization. However, in places where the mass media are not well developed, or where structural impediments (signal weakness, high reception costs, illiteracy) make widespread use of certain media impractical, other means of popularization may be preferable. In such contexts 'narrowcasting'² approaches, and alternative communication³

channels could be used. Some of these methods involve use of new modern communication technologies, while others rely on more indigenous or traditional forms. In the African situation, a creative combination of modern and traditional methods of communication may provide the most cost-effective approach to the dissemination of population information.

African Mass Media and Population Information

The development of the institutions and facilities for mass communication in Africa has run parallel to the general development (or underdevelopment) of social services on the continent. Almost exclusively in the hands of government, the broadcast media (radio and television) have been constrained by the funding limits on public expenditure so that in almost no African country do these media cover the total national territory with their signals. Radio, by far the most widespread medium, offers both rural and urban areas programmes in the official languages (English, French, Portuguese, Arabic and Kiswahili) as well as other national and ethnic languages. Television is essentially an urban and minority medium. Its immense power and disproportionate influence derives from its being the medium to which the political and economic elite pay the most attention. Thus while radio is attractive to governments because it enables them to reach 'the masses', television cannot be realistically downplayed even if the cost of receivers places it out of the reach of the majority of Africans.

Recent figures show that by 1985 there were 710 radio transmitters and 48 million receivers (or 113 per 1000 inhabitants), 270 television transmitters, 5 million receivers (or 12 sets per 1,000 inhabitants) in Africa. Assuming about 6 listeners/viewers per set, the radio audience would be about 288 million, and for television, about 30 million.⁴ This would mean, in theory, that at least nine out of ten Africans should be able to have access to radio while 1 in 10 can view television. Such aggregate thinking of course obscures the large differences among countries and localities in physical access to broadcast media. Programming preferences of broadcast organizations often eliminate large numbers of potential listeners, while many select themselves 'out' of attention to broadcasts because of their own needs for, and uses of, media. However, vast numbers still listen to radio and see it as a constant source of valuable development information.

Recent studies in Nigeria suggest that less educated people value radio for more than entertainment; in fact, they tend to rate entertainment quite low in their programme preferences, giving pride of place to practical information on political developments, agriculture, commodity and crop prices, education, etc. On television, news, and current affairs, and health programmes compete with dramatic serials and foreign features for most-favoured status among viewers.

Government ownership and control of the broadcast media, while compromising free expression and socio-political analysis is, in a number of countries, the major stimulus for continuing media attention to social change programmes in agriculture, health, literacy and population, as well as special projects directed at women, youth and rural dwellers. Therefore, a considerable amount of development information is usually transmitted through the broadcast media (particularly radio) to a broadly-based audience where they are able to afford sets and the signals can reach them.

In most of Africa, the print media are weak or non-existent. 'Even in 1989 there are still as many as eight countries in Africa in which no 'daily general-interest newspapers' are published. The majority of African countries publish only one daily newspaper: and most newspapers have fairly low circulation figures due to economic, educational, technical and distribution constraints.⁵ Although accurate figures are not available, it can be expected that the publication of periodicals such as magazines and journals, especially of specialized nature, is even less buoyant than newspaper publishing.

The worsening economic situation of most African countries probably means that the information-communication sector, never high on the priority of government resource allocation, may suffer further neglect, thus occasioning further shrinking access to the media for the majority of people. Under these conditions, special interests willing to subsidize the media to 'push' certain messages or advocate particular services could, through providing enabling funding, create new orientations of media content and new opportunities for public access to specialized information.

Recent experiences of UNICEF (with ORT/EPI) and of religious groups demonstrate the efficacy of this approach. Working with media organizations in many countries, assisting them in acquiring production equipment and in training specialized staff, UNICEF has been able to direct media content and attention towards issues of maternal health and child survival, especially providing publicity for EPI and ORT programmes and services. Similarly, by buying airtime on radio and television or taking out advertisements in magazines and newspapers, Christian and Muslim religious organizations have increased public exposure to their presence and activities.

In the population field, UNFPA has supported the publication of periodic newsletters for media use as well as audio cassette transcription programmes for broadcast or other use by radio stations. In its work in various countries, John Hopkins University's Population Communication Services has been involved in the development and production of audiovisual materials for diffusion through the media. In Nigeria, for example, their efforts have included funding for the production and airing of a television variety programme, *In a Lighter*

Mood in Anambra State; of radio and television jingles and, recently, of a musical production available as a record album and audio and video cassettes. Titled *Wait for Me*, it features two of Nigeria's best known popular musicians, 'King' Sunny Ade, and Onyeka Onwenu. Media publicity and broadcasts of the tape, and reviews in magazines and newspapers, have created continuing attention to family planning and the consequences of unrestrained teenage sexual behaviour.

The release and use of such materials have become 'media events' in their own right; but the essential fact is that almost all of those efforts have involved outside 'catalyst' funding and technical support, and have tended to take off from family planning service delivery, although other issues of population and development also receive mention, if not indepth treatment.

Whether these activities constitute 'population information' or 'population communication' is a moot point. It is clear that creative use of the opportunities provided by such experimentation, and spinoffs from them, could be of tremendous benefit to the popularization of population information, and especially to the institutionalization of population information within African countries. Rather than adopt a 'purist' approach to population information dissemination based on 'classical' strategies, institutions in the African region must seek new avenues for exploring the networking of different types and levels of information dissemination activities already in existence, and ride on their shoulders in order to reach desired levels of understanding among target groups. Such avenues require an appreciation of the feebleness of African mass media structures and what can be done to strengthen them so that they can be appropriate vehicles for population information, education and communication.

A major area of need is training for media managers and line professionals in the interpretation and use of technical population facts and figures, the relationship of population issues to the national development process, and communication support for specific population programmes such as censuses, surveys, vital registration, women's education, etc.

Although the need for such training is not much in doubt, and some modest beginnings have occurred with joint co-operation among population specialists and media organizations, the kind of detailed needs assessment and, consequently, appropriate packaging and sequencing of training programmes required, is yet to be put in place. A UNFPA grant to the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) for the pre-service training of middle level entrants to journalism in reporting population issues is too recent to yield much that can be evaluated; but lessons learnt from such a venture could be quite useful. The project proposal includes training for the staff of GIJ to enable them to perform their training functions adequately. Details of the curriculum are yet to

be worked out, and linkages between the project and population institutions and research activities at the regional level (e.g. at RIPS in Accra) are yet to be clarified.

Similar training programmes for already employed journalists need to be elaborated, taking into account individual career goals and organizational commitment to investing in population and development reporting. The extent to which 'population' should become a specialized 'desk' in media organizations, what should be covered, and how it relates to other reportorial and journalistic tasks also deserves detailed discussion. The 1988 POPIN-Africa Roundtable for the media held in Dakar, Senegal, with the collaboration of PANA, URTNA and several national media representatives, touched on some of these issues, as did some of the discussion at the UNFPA-funded seminar for African journalists and media training institutions organized in Yaounde in May 1989 by UNESCO. In discussing the recommendations of these two events, it may be useful to explore ideas which will enable more detailed and concrete approaches to the planning and execution of continuing education for media professionals in population information in the Africa region.

In this connection, it should be remembered that some African media organizations have already received recognition and encouragement for excellence in population reporting. In 1984, nine newspapers from eight countries received awards provided by the Population Institute. Radio and television organizations have been similarly recognized for their work in this field. It would be interesting to find out how many of the journalists who helped to win recognition for these organizations are still active in population reporting, and how many of the same organizations have continued their excellent work in the field. Perhaps a tracer or follow-up study would provide insights into the constraints and opportunities which confront African media organizations and professionals seeking to provide population information as a continuous service to their readers, listeners and viewers.

Notes

1. Knowledge brokerage is a concept that seeks to link specialist information with non-specialist needs through a process of 'translation' or popularization or simplification or 'de-jargonization'. A brokerage mechanism which is a part of the information provider would be located for example in POPIN-Africa offices where a team of writers engages in rewriting technical material for media and NGO use. On the other hand, this function could be contracted out to another institution. Finally, the media or NGOs (as end-users) could themselves retain the services of persons who translate technical materials for their use.
2. 'Narrowcasting' is a term which refers to use of electronic technology (audio/video) to reach small groups of listeners and viewers. It is different from 'broadcasting' which is over the airwaves transmission of the same programme materials. 'Narrowcasting' has been used in social development programmes especially with rural communities. It has

also been an important mode of communication linking policy-makers with their constituencies.

3. Alternative communication channels are usually smaller, more independent, publications or group media, controlled by NGOs or community groups outside the more 'established' media.
4. The Nigerian Television Authority, NTA claims that it has 30 million viewers for its primetime nightly news bulletin, i.e. 25 per cent of the population.
5. From address of the Chairman of the African Conference of Information Ministers to the OAU Council of Ministers, Addis Ababa, July 1989 (Data originally from UNESCO sources).
6. 'Wait for me', King Sunny Ade and the New African Beats, APLPS9, 1989. (Audiocassette).

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