

# A QUICK LOOK AT ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION AS A PARADIGM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

The need to sustain our environment has become a matter of concern at the global circle. But how to create this awareness and drive certain programmes and policies to effect and behavior change on this issue depends on the communication strategies put in place to drive the purpose. Thus the need for *Environmental Communication*-a new transdisciplinary paradigm that involves the use of communication approaches principles and techniques to convey environmental information and data between people. The need for environmental sustainability with the help of environmental communication is what this research article suggests. The agenda-setting approach of the media can best be applied to achieve this goal. Communication is a vital tool that if properly applied can help to ensure environmental sustainability and promote healthy environmental best practices.

**KEYWORDS:** Environmental Communication, Paradigm, Environmental Sustainability.

## INTRODUCTION

Stories about the environment continue to make media headlines on daily basis-radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and even the new media of communication. The amount of environmental information available globally has increased considerably in recent times. A lot of support systems have been put in place as a consequence of the various international activities, seminars, summits, conventions and conferences in order to give the public access to environmental information and to arouse public consciousness on the negative effects of poor environmental practices.

With approaches such as the *United Nations Conference on Human Environment* in

Stockholm in 1972, *The 5<sup>th</sup> Action Programme of the European Communities* as well as the implementation of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* also known as *Earth Summit, 1992*, and many others, the struggle for environmental sustainability has been treated with serious concern. Obabori, Ekpu and Ojealoro (2009) have noted that the promulgation of the Federal Environmental Agency Decree No. 58 of 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1998 signaled attempts of contending with ugly incidents of environmental problems for Nigeria. Similarly, the World Bank's 2002 interim gas flaring report on Nigeria has noted that the most striking example of environmental neglect in the country had been

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recorded in the oil sector where natural gas flaring had contributed more emissions of greenhouse gases than all other sources in Sub-Saharan Africa combined.

Lungu (2007) submitted that over the years, environmental degradation has been seen to manifest in a variety of ways. Within the global context, Africa assessed as a rural and the least urbanized continent, with the antecedent high rate of slum development, crime, under development and overpopulation (Daramola and Ibem, 2010, p. 129). The continent may not be one of the worst in violating healthy environmental practices, but the consequences of environmental degradation have hit Africa badly. Natural disasters such as earthquake, drought, flooding, very high temperature, and so on, are regularly observed within some African countries.

The problem of environmental sustainability has become great that the eventual survival of an average Nigerian now hangs on a balance. Generally, it would be far-fetched trying to convince a typical Nigerian on the threats that environmental problems poses to life. Thus, there is the need for full utilization and understanding of the concept of *Environmental Communication (EnvCom or EC)*. This article therefore, takes a quick look on this paradigm and how it can be applied in the struggle towards attaining a global environmental sustainability.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION: A QUICK LOOK AT THE PARADIGM**

The environment is fundamental for all living things. Every resource necessary for their existence is interrelated in one way or the other to the environment. But without effective management strategies to ensure the protection and proper management of the environment, the existence of life on this planet becomes impossible. That is why “all people

need to have a common understanding of the role played by human beings in reducing or worsens environmental deterioration” (Dalelo, 2007, p.8).

Communication has become a necessary tool to ensure success in the struggle for environmental sustainability. The media have major roles to play in making people aware of the environmental issues, consequently getting them involved in the efforts aimed at protecting or managing our environment. This reliance on the media has prompted, according to Tengbers (1995) over 2,600 media channels to operate with the support of about 3,000 satellites, reaching nearly 1.5 billion people across the globe. Therefore, one can submit that the majority of global citizens learn about environmental issues, beyond their immediate environments through the media. Hence, the necessity for the development of the new paradigm of environmental communication.

The concept of EnvCom is an interesting one. Whether one looks at it from a separate view of the two key words that form it, a simple meaning can be deduced from it. Many scholars have tried to give a definition of the concept based on the context used. Pillmann (2002) defines EnvCom as any kind of environmentally relevant information flow which involves both communicators and audiences and is achieved through coding, effective message delivery and interactive listening. This implies that EnvCom is the communication of environmental data and information between various audiences using different media. Such communication is the foundation for establishing relationships between people and the environment and a means for enhancing environmental literacy and sustainable environmental practices.

Flor (2004), further defines EnvCom as the application of communication approaches, principles, strategies and techniques to environmental management and protection. It

is the study and practice of how individuals, institutions, societies and cultures craft, distribute, receive and understand and use messages about the environment and human interactions, from inter-personal communication to virtual communities, participatory decision making and environmental media coverage.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1999) defines EnvCom as the planned and strategic use of communication processes and the media products to support effective policy making, public participation and project implementation geared towards environmental sustainability. It is a two-way social interaction process enabling the people concerned to understand key environmental factors and their interdependencies and to respond to problems in competent ways.

Environmental Communication is a significant element in environmental sciences, which it is believed to be a transdiscipline. Its emergence is traced to the interdisciplinary work involving communication, environmental studies, environmental science, risk analysis and management, sociology and political ecology. This 'marriage' has caused Flor (2004) to submit the era of transdisciplinary studies has arrived. Flor and other scholars realized that our understanding of nature and our actions towards the environment depend not only on science but also on public debate, media, the internet and even ordinary dialogues and person-to-person conversations. Thus, alongside the growth of environmental studies, there is also the emergence of educational and professional opportunities that stress the role of human communication in environmental affairs. Similarly, scholars in cultural studies are mapping some of the ways in which images in popular media sustain attitudes of dominance and exploitation of the natural world (Opel, Johnston and Wilk, 2010).

## **ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION AND THE NEED FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Mass media have a greater role in promoting environmental sustainability. It serves this purpose by means of its multi-channel regional and network service comprising programmes such as interviews, talks, plays and documentaries. These combined efforts help to bring to a total halt the various forces that affect the natural as well as the artificial environment. But matters of how much the public mind can be mobilized to reduce pollution and promote healthy environmental quality can best be addressed through the use of the media of communication.

EnvCom is helpful in creating awareness about environmental pollution and conservation of natural resources. It contributes to dialogue and social actions, while also helping to build local capacities and allows people to share their experiences. Environmental sustainability is talked about in relations to all aspects of our lives, but the overall goal is to keep our environment safe. Morelli (2011) has put it that broadly speaking, this concept of environmental communication might be seen as adding depth to a portion of the meaning of the most common definition of sustainable environment, i.e. "meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs" by taking on the general definition "meeting the resource and service needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them", ("Our Common Future" (Morelli, 2011, p. 5).

More specifically, environmental sustainability could be defined as a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither

exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity.

Considering the relevance of the environment to man, there is no question regarding the need for environmental sustainability since life itself is a product of the environment as held by the General Systems theorists. So, sustaining our environment is a task that everyone must make effort to achieve. Thus, the need for environmental sustainability depends on the following:

- Economic Development
- Social Development
- Environmental Protection

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

The issue of economic development is about giving people what they want without compromising quality of life, especially in the developing world, and reducing the financial burden and 'red tape' of doing the right thing. According to Goodland (1995), after substantiating a history documenting this need, puts forth the definition of environmental sustainability as the maintenance of natural capital and as a concept, apart from, but connected to both social sustainability and economic sustainability. So, continuous depletion or damage by human activities to irreplaceable and unsubstitutable environmental services would be incompatible with sustainability. This gives rise to the need for environmental sustainability.

### **SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Another need for environmental sustainability is to pave way for social development. Midgley (1995) defined social development as a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in

conjunction of the dynamic process of economic development. Social and economic developments depend on each other to thrive. Social development aims to promote the social and economic well-being of societies or social groups, and such units are always composed of individual actors. As Homfeldt and Reutlinger (2008) has posited, it stands for making specific individuals capable of acting, who then, with the help of participation, serve as motors to drive forward the economic and social well-being of the community as a whole. With such headings as capacity building and capacity development, the goal of social development is enabling people to act. This is often viewed as macrosocially linked to institutionalized forms of cooperative development. Thus, one can say that social development is about improving the well-being of every individual in society so they can reach their full potential. There must be available some environmental sustainability policies and programmes that support this growth, otherwise the aim and objective of social development ends in total disarray.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

Environmental protection has become a major concern for all mankind. The protection of the key elements of our environment has become important for human health. This concern ranges from the ability to breathe clean air, have a supply of wholesome drinking water and to be protected against the harmful effects of things like waste and noise. All these elements are fundamental to man's overall well-being. Dogaru (2013) observed that environmental protection problems are a challenge for which there is a single policy, but the combination of existing opportunities and increase of efficiency in all social and economic areas of states would contribute to solving the problem of resources and distribution. Environmental protection is currently a principal area of cooperation and international regulations which assumes a

global or across borders dimension. The persistence, purpose and inter-temporal nature of environmental problems, call for global actions of prevention.

The need for a sustainable ecosystem is more important than the amount of wealth created by any nation at the detriment of the environment. Thus, Morelli (2011) posited that whether one considers environmental sustainability to exist as a three-legged

table consisting the environment, the economy and society, or as a dualistic relationship between human beings and the ecosystem they inhabit, there should at least be agreement that ensuring the provision of clean water, and clean air and productive land is foundational to a responsible socioeconomic system.

### **ENVCOM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE AGENDA-SETTING APPROACH**

The understanding of the agenda-setting theory and its application in the environmental sustainability campaign goes a long way in explaining the role that communication vis-à-vis mass media can play in the overall success of such campaigns. Also referred to as the *Agenda-setting function of the mass media*, the theory was first propounded by the early communication scholars - Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. McCombs and Shaw originally suggested that the media sets the agenda for public discussion. This implies that the media do not tell you what to think, but what to think about.

McQuail (1994) further explained the agenda-setting by explaining that the media provide issues in news coverage by way of influencing the rank order of public awareness of issues and attribution of significance, which, in effect could influence public policy making. The theory holds the ultimate view that the media

has the capacity to promote an issue and cause it to be addressed regularly. This theory is intended to apply to news media, although in certain cases it has been applied to other areas of media research and message transmission to the audience. Thus, the agenda-setting theory can be regarded as containing some components of environmental communication theory. It can as well be fully applied in this research by way of assessing the level of attention and consideration the media of communication give to environmental coverage and reports.

Agenda-setting involves not only in getting environmental issues onto the public domain but also emphasizes the way those issues are defined, explained for public understanding and the probable solutions that are being considered to be suitable. Here, the role of environmental communication professionals is more evident than that of environmental science think tanks who are usually acting behind the scenes. Thus, the agenda-setting strength of the mass media can be effectively utilized to support the role of the media in creating awareness, refining behaviours, raising consciousness, encouraging community participation and developing public's disposition towards environmental sustainability.

### **CONCLUSION**

The issue of environmental sustainability has become a matter of concern to everyone. The need for the application of environmental communication paradigm further gives us the hope that a sustainable environment is an achievable goal because communication in its general sense provides us with a means of sense making about the world, it orients us toward events, people, wildlife and choices that we encounter. But unless a more robust awareness work is done to reduce environmental degradation and other poor

environmental practices in the near future, it is very likely that many parts of the world, especially the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) of Africa and Asia will continue to suffer the dangers posed by poor environmental practices.

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