

LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR RURAL COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY IN THE PANDEMIC ERA IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the whole world, has raised the importance of language to a higher level. The news of the pandemic reached the innermost parts of our communities. From the urban areas to the remotest villages, people became aware of the onslaught of the virus. This was made possible by means of communication, either orally or electronically. However, communication is made possible through the use of language, either written or unwritten. This paper aims at highlighting the importance of language as a veritable tool for ensuring that rural communities in Nigeria are not wiped out during the era of the pandemic by the use of sustainable communication. Adopting the analytical approach, the paper concludes that the proper use of language to mobilise people can ensure that our rural communities are preserved while improper use of language can lead to the extinction of our rural communities.*

Keywords: pandemic era, rural community, language, community mobilisation, sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way of life of people. To certain groups, the change has been packed with positive results while others are counting their losses. However, the changes vary in dimension from place to place. The effects of the pandemic in the cities are quite different from those of the rural areas. Naturally, the needs of the rural dwellers differ from the needs of the urban centres, especially, during the pandemic era. Olanipekun, (2015, p.161) affirms this as he asserts that:

The inhabitants of the rural areas most especially in the developing and under developed countries are confronted with serious problems of high unemployment, social and spatial segregation, social exclusion, health threats and concern over their future economy, crime and general quality of life, its negative impact on health and pressure on natural

and historic assets.

In 2019, the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) began to monitor the outbreak of a new coronavirus, SARS-COV-2, which causes the respiratory illness now known as COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020). The most common way of transmission is through close contact with already infected person. When infected people breathe out or cough, they expel tiny droplets that contain the virus. These droplets can enter the mouth or nose of someone without the virus, causing the spread of infection to occur (Parry 2020). Infection can also be caused by touching surfaces or objects where these droplets land. World leaders found ways to combat the pandemic in their communities. In Nigeria, for example, the Federal Ministry of Education ordered the closure of all schools on March 19, 2020. In addition, restriction was placed on inter-state movement, market places were locked, religious gatherings of more than ten persons were banned, social activities such as

parties, ceremonies and club meetings, and so on, were placed on hold (Parke, 2020). The only way to reduce the spread of infection is for the citizens to know the channels of infection and relevant precautions to take. Knowledge such as regular hand washing, using hand sanitizers, wearing face masks, respiratory etiquettes, social distancing and self-isolation when sick are vital to reducing widespread infection (Leppin & Aro, 2019).

In the heat of the pandemic in 2020, governments embarked on widespread sensitization on the televisions, radios, the print media and the social media. Lectures were going on every evening on the televisions for secondary school learners in many states. However, these privileges were concentrated in the urban areas. Most rural communities, especially in Nigeria do not enjoy social amenities like electricity, thus the use of cell phones is drastically reduced. Information dissemination is mostly by word of mouth from people who travel to nearby urban centres for commercial purposes, to seek medical help from city hospitals, visit relatives, or attend religious programmes. Such people come back with exaggerated versions of information circulating about the pandemic. Thus, residents of rural communities are at the mercy of informants from the cities since they cannot have first-hand information.

Two or three decades ago, the use of transistor radios bridged the communication gap between villagers and town folks. Signals could still be received even in remote villages albeit irregularly. The advent of Information and Communication Technology, however, brought the dearth of transistor radios and other analogue appliances. Even villagers who have cell phones find it difficult to use them because there is no electricity to charge them. When charged, network is very poor because communication outfits do not take their masts into remote places, most of the time. National Youth Corps members face this problem when they serve in rural areas. Resultantly, information about COVID-19 in such areas are usually outdated, distorted, exaggerated, embellished and watered down. If the information received is that the

virus has been arrested, people would stop observing the COVID-19 protocol such as avoiding crowds. This can result to mass infection and subsequent deaths. If the information says infection can be caused by eating the staple foods available in the communities, there will be an outbreak of panic and confusion. Thus, the way language is used for information dissemination in the pandemic era can draw a fine line between life and death. This makes proper language use a prerogative for the sustainability of our rural communities. This can be achieved through different means by community leaders.

PANDEMIC ERA AND RURAL COMMUNITY

A pandemic is an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographical area and typically affects a significant proportion of the population. A pandemic era simply means the period during which the disease ravages communities. A rural community is an open swath of land that has few homes or other buildings, and not very many people. In general, a rural area or country side is a geographic area that is located outside towns and cities.

LANGUAGE

In an attempt to explain language, Edward Sapir (1884-1939) says that language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, feelings and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols (Sapir, 1921). One of the specific features of language is the expression of thought and feeling which is exclusively reserved for man alone out of all the creatures in the world. As a means of communication, language is used both in speech and in writing. It must be emphasised that language is primarily spoken, while the written one is secondary and derivative. Language is a common feature of all cultures. It is language that allows the members of any society to share ideas, feelings, information, skills etc. It is language that permits the transmission of culture (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2007).

COMMUNITY MOBILISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Community mobilization is a process or means of encouraging, influencing and arousing the interest of the members of a community to put them in a state of readiness for action and service (Bassey & Ottong, 2015). This means getting the peoples together to act with concerted effort in finding solutions to some of their local problems. In this pandemic era, mobilization therefore, becomes crucial in ensuring sustainability in able rural communities. This is because, as asserted by Bassey and Ottong (2015, p.119),

Community mobilization empowers community members by providing adequate information, relevant education, technical support and decision – making possibilities for action in the interest of the community.

This aims at ensuring deep sense of commitment among members of the community. This will enable the presentation of well-prepared information and communication which will reduce the impact of fake news.

Sustainability, on the other hand, means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The development which meets the development of the present generation without damaging the health of the future generations is termed sustainable development (Anable, Lane & Kelay 2006)

THE PLACE OF LEADERSHIP IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

Rural community leaders must know how to mobilise their followers in order to ensure high level of commitment. When the community leadership is informed the encouragement would

be there for the followership to be informed (Adedokun, 2016). Community leader is a designation for a person who is perceived to represent a community. Community leadership is usually based in a place and so it can be termed local. A strong and civic community would be put in place if the leader is literate, knowledgeable and skillful (Gauntlet, Hugman & Kenyan, 2000). Leaders are important in any form of development because they are responsible for shaping a community focus, listening to people’s needs, making important decisions for the benefit of the community. They must have foresight, encourage fair treatment of people and develop partnerships that will benefit the community (Adedokun, 2011). Good governance boils down to promoting democracy where the voice of every community member is heard and where poverty is drastically reduced through the ingenuity of the leader (Adedokun, 2016).

No organization or group can accomplish stated goals without effective communication. The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015 contains 17 goals. The third goal on the list is “good health and well-being”, the eleventh is “sustainable cities and communities”, and the sixteenth is “peace, justice and strong institutions”. None of these goals can be achieved without effective communication (Nyong & Ajayi, 2021). Language, according to Ofuani and Ofuani (2014) is man’s most important endowment. It is both a source of power and an instrument for exercising power. Communication is all about languages and language, as man’s most important endowment, can be used to foster mutual understanding between people. Where there is understanding, there will be peace. The fruits of peace are progress, development, happiness, and brotherliness (Nyong & Ajayi 2021).

WAYS OF USING LANGUAGE TO ENHANCE SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

- **Health Campaigns and rallies**

Community leaders can invite health personnel from the cities to come to their villages and address the people. On the alternative, the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and other government agencies saddled with sensitization programmes on the pandemic should take their campaigns also into the rural communities. If a certain community is very large, only sectional or unit heads can be summoned to avoid large crowds. The health personnel will intimate the people or their representatives on the current realities concerning the pandemic. There has been a preponderance of fabricated lies, deceptions and misinformation on the social media about the COVID-19 vaccines. There are some showing electric bulbs being lighted on coming in contact with the “supposed” spot where an individual was vaccinated. Other short clips showed metallic objects like keys, spoons and bottle openers being magnetized to the arms of vaccinated people. Information such as these cause a lot of panic among the citizens, especially those who have taken the vaccines. Thus proper use of language will save people from hypertension and untimely deaths. When people have information they behave well. Urban dwellers may have the opportunity to watch other video clips debunking these false and alarming videos explaining and showing that the bulbs used are “trick bulbs” operating by battery mechanism and having on / off buttons. However, in the remote areas in the villages, this information may not reach the dwellers there. As we know, bad news travels faster and wider. Thus regular health rallies would help allay fears and demystify myths about the pandemic.

- **The Use of Town Criers**

Town criers are persons officially assigned by the village or community elders for the purpose of information dissemination. Town criers must enter every nook and cranny of their communities to disseminate information from

the community leaders. As a follow-up from the health campaigns and rallies, town criers can be assigned to move around the communities to debunk fallacies and lies that may have earlier circulated by giving authentic information about the pandemic and its prevention. This will reduce panic.

- **Lyrics Approach**

Lyrics approach involves conveying sharp and very precise messages to the public in local languages and dialects (Bassey & Ottong, 2015). According to them, besides the entertaining melody of the lyrics, the messages therein have serious implication for community sensitization. This is the strategy usually adopted by local patent medicine dealers in our rural communities to pull crowds. Another way of applying the lyrics approach is through the use of local bards in the community. They can be employed to spread every new message concerning the pandemic. These composed songs, oral adverts and spontaneous poetic renditions and slogans would be on every one’s lips.

- **Advocacy**

This is a process of social mobilization that involves a kind in conversation between two or more people on a topical issue of public concern. It is aimed at clearing doubts and ignorance (Bassey & Ottong, 2015, p. 127). According to them,

there are, at times, high level of ignorance, misconceptions and fallacies in society about certain problems, ideas innovations, new methods which can be changed only through better information. Thus, in community work, an advocate is a supporter of a cause who, not only educates others on the issue, but also recommends appropriate cause of action and pleads in favour of its acceptance.

Under the process of advocacy, every community leader can summon all the chiefs under him, clan heads, religious leaders, market women leaders, principals, headmasters or headmistresses of rural schools, leaders of artisan groups and youth leaders, to regular meetings for discussions about the virus. These factional leaders will go back and educate their followers. This will reduce panic and fear caused by fake news by panic mongers.

• Advertisement Approach

Rural communities can also be sustained through the use of pamphlets, handbills and posters carrying messages about COVID-19. Such print media can be widely distributed in the community. Literate members of the community will interpret the messages to their illiterate neighbours. Below are some popular examples used by the Centre for Disease Control:

- * Avoid crowded places
- * Wash your hands regularly
- * Use hand sanitizer
- * No mask, No entry
- * Observe social distancing
- * Get vaccinated
- * Delta variant is here and more

deadly

These notices can be interpreted into local dialects and languages and be circulated around rural committees by town criers.

CONCLUSION

This paper emphasised the role of language in sustaining rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Language, as man's most important endowment, is a veritable instrument to foster mutual understanding between people. Where there is understanding, there will be consensus on how to manage immediate problems including COVID-19. As such, peace will reign in such communities. The fruits of peace are progress, development, happiness, and brotherliness. On the other hand, poor use of

language could circumvent the peaceful coexistence that could trigger the COVID-19 spread in the rural communities, thereby affecting community sustainable development.

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