

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

Njah BASSEY ETTA¹, Emmanuel NYONG INYANG¹

¹Lecturer, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria
Corresponding author: Njah Bassey Etta; e-mail:fabian_etta@yahoo.ca

Abstract

The need to sustain our environment has become a matter of concern at global level. But, how to create this awareness and drive certain programmes and policies to achieve and change behavior on this issue depends on the communication strategies applied to drive such purposes. Thus, the need for *Environmental Communication* - a new transdisciplinary paradigm that involves the use of communication - approaches the principles and techniques to convey environmental information and data among people. The need for environmental sustainability through 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 environmental sustainability and promote healthy environmental practices.

Keywords: *environmental communication, environmental sustainability.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Stories about the environment continue to make media headlines on a 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. Numerous supporting systems have been introduced as a consequence of the various international activities, seminars, summits, conventions and conferences, for giving public access to environmental information and for arousing public awareness on the negative effects of poor environmental practices.

With approaches such as the *United Nations Conference on Human Environment* held in Stockholm in 1972, *The 5th 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 30th December, 1998 signaled attempts regarding the 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 recorded in the oil sector, where natural gas flaring had produced more emissions of greenhouse gases than all other sources in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Lungu (2007) showed that, over the years, environmental degradation has been manifested in a variety of ways. Within the global context, Africa appeared as a rural and least urbanized continent, with the antecedent high rate of slum development, crime, underdevelopment and overpopulation (DARAMOLA & IBEM, 2010). 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 extremely important, so 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 pose to life. Thus, there is the need for a full utilization and understanding of the concept of *Environmental*

Communication (EnvCom or EC). Accordingly, this article takes a quick look on this paradigm and how it can be applied for attaining global environmental sustainability.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION: A QUICK LOOK AT THE PARADIGM

The environment is fundamental for all living beings. Every resource necessary for their existence is interrelated in one way or the other to the environment. But, without effective management strategies to ensure its protection and proper management, 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 worsening environmental deterioration" (DALELO, 2007).

Communication has become a necessary tool in the struggle for environmental sustainability. Media have major roles to play in making people aware of the environmental issues, of 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 which operate with the support of about 3,000 satellites, reaching nearly 1.5 billion people across the globe. Therefore, one can assert that the majority of global citizens learn about environmental issues, beyond their immediate environments, through the media, which explains the necessity for the development of a new paradigm of environmental communication.

The concept of EnvCom is an interesting one. If considering it from a separate perspective of the two keywords that form it, a simple meaning can be deduced. 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 represents the communication of environmental data and information between various audiences using different media, and the foundation for

establishing relationships between people and the environment, and also 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 apply, distribute, receive, understand and use messages about environment and human interactions, from inter-personal communication to virtual communities, participatory decision making and environmental media coverage.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (1999) defines EnvCom as a planned and strategic use of communication processes and 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 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 made Flor (2004) assert that 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, internet and even on ordinary dialogues and person-to-person conversations. Thus, in parallels with 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 & WILK, 2010).

3. ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION AND THE NEED FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Mass media have a more and more important role in promoting environmental sustainability. It serves this purpose by means of multi-channel regional and network services, including 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 communication media.

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, allowing people to share their experience. Environmental sustainability is approached in relation to all aspects of our lives, but the overall goal is to keep our environment safe. Morelli (2011) has asserted that, broadly speaking, the concept of environmental communication might be seen as adding depth to the meaning of the most common definition of sustainable environment, *i.e.* "meeting the needs of the current generations 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", 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 humans, the question regarding the need for environmental sustainability is undebatable, since life itself is a product of the environment, as stated by General System theorists.

Accordingly, sustaining our environment is a task that everyone should achieve. The need for environmental sustainability depends on the following aspects:

- Economic Development
- Social Development
- Environmental Protection

Economic Development

The issue of economic development is about giving people what they want without compromising the quality of life, especially in the developing world, while reducing the financial burden and the 'red tape' of doing the right thing. After substantiating a history documenting this need, Goodland (1995) puts forth the definition of environmental sustainability as the maintenance of natural capital, and also as a concept, apart from it, yet connected to both social and economic sustainability. In this way, the continuous depletion or damage, as a result of human activities, up 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 the 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. Social development aims at promoting the social and economic well-being of societies or social groups, which always include individual actors. According to Homfeldt and Reutlinger (2008), it should make specific individuals capable of action and, by the participation of the others, 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 involves the improvement of the well-being of every individual in society, up to

reaching full potential. Precise environmental sustainability policies and programmes that support this growth must be available, otherwise the aim and objective of social development ends in total disarray.

Environmental Protection

Environmental protection has become a major concern for mankind. Protection of the key elements of our environment has become important for human health. This concern ranges from the ability to breathe clean air, having a supply of wholesome drinking water and protection 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, whereas the combination of the existing opportunities and the 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 and 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 to the detriment of the environment. Thus, Morelli (2011) stated that, if one considers environmental sustainability as a three-legged table consisting of the environment, economy and society, or as a dualistic relationship between human beings and the ecosystem they inhabit, they should at least agree that ensuring the provision of clean water, of clean air and productive land is essential for a responsible socio-economic system.

4. ENVCOM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE AGENDA-SETTING APPROACH

Understanding of the agenda-setting theory and its application as part of the environmental sustainability campaign requires special efforts to explain the role that communication can play

versus mass media for assuring the overall success of such initiatives. Also referred to as the *Agenda-setting function of the mass media*, the theory was first proposed, in 1972, by the first communication scholars - Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who originally suggested that media set 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 showing that the media provide issues in news coverage by influencing the rank order of public awareness of issues and attribution of significance which, eventually, could influence public policy making. The theory holds the ultimate view that the media have the capacity to promote an issue and cause its regular addressing. This theory is intended to be applied to news media, although, in certain cases, it has been also extended 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 the environmental communication theory. It can equally be fully applied in this research by assessing the level of attention and consideration which the media of communication give to environmental coverage and reports.

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

5. CONCLUSIONS

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, as communication, in its general interpretation, provides us with a means of sense making about the world, orienting us toward events, people, wildlife and choices that we are to make. However, 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 induced by poor environmental practices.

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