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Functional communication in non-governmental organizations: Challenges for post-literacy development and language education opportunities

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The present study examined the Nigerian situation in relation to the language needs of the fast growing 'third sector', that is, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Sample for the study consisted of 85 respondents from 10 randomly selected NGOs in the southwestern part of Nigeria. Observation and questioning techniques were used to gather relevant data. Of the 85 respondents, 84 opined that there were unaddressed language needs in NGOs, this was due to a difference in the focus of donor agencies (felt or perceived needs) and the actual needs of NGO workers. Other responses showed actual needs of the different categories of NGO staff. In order to derive maximum benefits from NGOs, there is the need to tailor language training programs to the actual needs of the different categories of NGO workers. This might actually include mass literacy programs which are not given emphasis at all by NGO collaborators.

INTRODUCTION

Farrington et al. (1993) have identified 2 firmly established sectors with a not-so established one in societies. The first 2 are the public and private sectors while the not-so established one comprises the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which they refer to as 'the third sector'. In their view, the great divide between public sector and private sector activities is being bridged by NGOs with feet on both sides. In effect, this gives to NGOs the role of becoming a 'missing link' between the 2 firmly established sectors with marked first tier responsibilities in the societies in which they operate.

Societies are made up of people with developmental needs and the inability of societies to satisfy these needs leads to problems. One of such developmental problems affecting people worldwide particularly in third world countries such as Nigeria is poverty. Poverty, according to Onibokun (1996), is a lack of access not only to money but many things. Connohpd (1996) expressed that if global trends are unchecked, about 1.5 billion people may be living below the poverty line by the year 2025. The NGOs again become a 'missing link' between the government and the poor with marked second tier responsibilities. These double-faceted responsibilities of NGOs pose challenges for literacy development and language use policies in the societies in which they are situated. It is therefore essential to examine NGOs more

closely.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

There is no gain-saying the fact that NGOs are expanding by leaps and bounds thereby entrenching their presence in the very fabric of societies in general and the Nigerian culture in particular. According to Ngeri-Nwagha (1995), in 1940 there were only 7 NGOs, many of the NGOs in Nigeria at present were established much later. These NGOs are many and diverse in nature of various types and sizes, registered, private, independent, non-profit organizations. They are clearly different from the public sector because they are voluntary and non-governmental in terms of origination, membership and funding and also clearly different from the private sector because they are non-profit oriented. The growth in number and operations as well as the recognition accorded them indicates a societal need which the NGOs are trying to fill. Ngeri-Nwagha (1995) stated that:

'NGOs have a comparative advantage as effective agents of development because of their relative administrative simplicity, their proximity to the grassroots, their ability to identify the felt

needs of the people and their efficient and cost effective mode of operation..."

Wellard and Copeland (1993) further stated that NGOs in their capacity for technology generation and dissemination,

"...are involved in identification of research priorities, evaluation of new technologies, innovation and experimentation using participatory methods, closer links with rural communities with a more intimate understanding of needs at this level."

From the statements above, it becomes clear that NGOs are development oriented. They are meant to focus on issues that will contribute to the development of the society in which they operate. However, unlike the 2 other sectors, their very existence is collaborative and dependent on funding from donor agencies. Their areas of operation include the public sector, donor agencies, communities and other NGOs.

The successes recorded in their development-oriented activities depend on their recognition of the different characteristics of and needs in their areas of operation. Consequently, Carroll (1992) and Farrington et al. (1993) have observed that many issues need to be resolved for NGOs to become more widespread and effective in their provision of services for societal development. Likewise Onibokun (1996) discussed managerial and technical inadequacies confronting some of these NGOs. In his view, before NGOs can play their roles, they need to be strengthened in areas such as proposal writing and helped to develop a more solid base for networking and information management through creating a medium of communication among other things.

This suggestion becomes timely considering Wellard and Copestake's (1993) impression of bad communication in NGOs. This poor state of communication, from the micro level, is further emphasized by Manguyu (1994) who explained that right from the level of goal-setting and proposal development, effective language use is imperative. The implication of these statements is highlighted by Demeney (1994) in his submission that language used in a program can greatly weaken it or influence provision of services and other things. Emphasis placed on proposal writing and communication is justified taking a look at the percentage training needs and consequent fund allocation for Nigeria highlighted by Ngeri-Nwagha (1995) reproduced below with the highest need listed first.

- i.) Proposal/report writing.
- ii.) Financial management.
- iii.) Programme management.
- iv.) Leadership.
- v.) Technical.
- vi.) Communication/Information.

vii.) Others.

Are all that are needed in NGOs, particularly in relation to language and communication, listed in this fund allocation arrangement? Are the NGO needs fully included in this list? There can be no development without a careful consideration of the issue of language and communication at both the micro and macro levels of operation.

COMMUNICATION IN NGO OPERATIONS

Communication which could be verbal or non-verbal is defined as the act of passing on, sharing, exchanging or being connected. Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia (2000) defines communication as "the process of sharing ideas, information and messages with others in a particular time and place". It further states that "communication includes writing and talking ...visual communication ... and electronic communication". The focus of this paper is on verbal communication.

By its very nature, communication is meant to be functional since it is a means to an end. Communication is taken with a view to understanding. Otagburuagu, Okorji and Ogenyi (2006) re-emphasise that communication starts from a sender to a receiver who understands the message and gives a response in the form of feedback. When understanding does not happen, then, communication is not functional. Logically, it means that if communication is not functional, there must be a/some problem(s) somewhere. The greatest problem people have with communication is the assumption that communication is taking place when it actually is not. Stanton (1982) stated that: "... approximately 70% of our waking time is spent in some form of communication with other people. But we must not assume that because we spend a lot of time communicating, we are doing it effectively". It may therefore be erroneous if it is assumed that those in NGO operations have received some form of education which should enable them to communicate effectively in their areas of operation. This assumption is not even true concerning native users who are still struggling to achieve appropriate and effective communication even for every day use. How much more for specialized NGO operations? Verbal communication-associated problems which may be due to unfounded assumptions could therefore be a major barrier to effective and efficient NGO operations.

A look at the array of operations and the multi-faceted development-oriented activities of these NGOs gives some concern when compared with their language activities. Their concern is in line with proposal/report writing and communication/information needs which are directly related to the emphasis of donor agencies shown in the distribution needs and fund distribution. Yet, emphasis has been placed on these areas due to a major

assumption that the pre-requisite language needs are already present in NGO operators. Is this really so? This study attempted to find out the language needs of local NGO operators in order to propose measures that would promote functional communication in their numerous operations.

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

A three-fold relationship is considered necessary among NGO operators in relation to their operations. The fallacy of thinking that operations will go on smoothly simply because some people in the various NGOs already speak the different languages of interest will affect NGOs and NGO operations adversely. There is the need for NGOs and their collaborators to see the integral link between literacy, language opportunities and functional communication which are all pre-requisites to report writing, focus of NGOs and their collaborators.

LITERACY

NGOs in their bid to inform, educate and communicate with communities have to be sensitive to the high illiteracy level of the Nigerian populace some of whom are in their employment. Literacy, which will bring about functional language use and effective communication, should be a tool for accomplishing effective NGO operations. Out of the various literacy types, NGOs need to focus on adequate literacy (Oxenham, 1986) or functional literacy (UNESCO) as well as information literacy (Rensburg, 2001). According to Ekpeyong (1999), adequate and functional literacy addresses basic skills of communication, ability to read, write and count or literacy for specific needs. Rensburg (2001) explained that information literacy develops in learners, crucial skills around the use of information and helps them take certain decisions in relation to what information is needed, from what sources, selection of the right amount of information and ways of evaluating and presenting information. Information literacy is important for NGOs as it targets verbal, visual and electronic communication. Any form of literacy which does not incorporate the use of technology in this ICT-driven age can not be said to be functional and will be limited in use and function. The importance of literacy is fully appreciated in its use or functionality. Ogenyi (2006), highlighting the importance of literacy stated that it "... is the raw material of language and communication".

Unfortunately, the high level of illiteracy in Nigeria in spite of the direction provided by the millennium development goals is still a source of concern for literacy providers and language educators. Onibokun (1996) stated that in terms of functional literacy, less than 60%

of the adult population can read and write in any language. Obasanjo (2006) expressed that over 51% of Nigerians were yet to become literate with a higher proportion of male (62.5%) than female (39.5%) literates. He further observed that 7.3 million children of school age were not yet in school and that from this number, 62% were girls. Even about those in school, Elley (2001 p.31) remarked generally that "... their literacy levels are low".

If this is the situation, then more attention should be placed on literacy by employing more aggressive ways to fight illiteracy. One of such ways is equipping NGOs adequately for effective service.

LANGUAGE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Language education opportunities in Nigeria which are reflected in the National Policy on Education (2004) are available within and outside the formal education sector. The numerous opportunities within school are as follows:

- i.) Learning English as a school subject.
- ii.) Using English as a medium of instruction.
- iii.) Learning one's mother tongue.
- iv.) Learning one of the major local languages.
- v.) Learning French or Arabic.

It is unfortunate that these language opportunities have not contributed to functional language use which ultimately affects communication. Results of examinations which test the efficacy of these exposures continue to reflect varying poor performances.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULT

The survey design was employed. Observation and structured questions were used to solicit required information. Observation was carried out in 3 NGOs and structured questions were asked in ten NGOs to identify the pre-requisite language needs of these NGOs in relation to the services rendered. This followed futile attempts to retrieve copies of the questionnaire sent out. The number of respondents varied from one NGO to the other based on the cooperation or lack of cooperation of the NGO operators and their consequent readiness or lack of readiness to answer questions on their activities. The issue of mutual distrust which according to Usman (1996) is one of the factors militating against NGO concerted efforts and operations might have been responsible for this attitude.

Responses from a total number of 85 respondents comprising 40 junior and 45 senior NGO staff were analysed using mean scores and percentages. All but one of the senior staff respondents affirmed that there were language needs. Further analyses on language

Table 1. Responses on language needs.

| Respondents | English | Local languages | Pidgin | French |
|--------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Senior staff | 42(93%) | 37(82%) | 34(76%) | 31(69%) |
| Junior staff | 40(100%) | 0(0%) | 0(0%) | 8(20%) |

Table 2. Identified NGO training needs.

| Training needs | Number | Percentage |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Language training | 74 | 87 |
| Mass literacy | 71 | 84 |
| Communication | 33 | 39 |
| Report Writing | 32 | 38 |

needs in relation to services rendered are reflected in Table 1. It is interesting but not surprising to note that the English language is rated more highly than other languages given the locality in which the NGOs used for the study are located. The responses regarding pidgin English (a local, substandard variety of English) and the local languages are also to be expected considering the areas of operation of these NGOs. The responses of the junior staff regarding English and that of the senior staff regarding French seem to provide food for thought particularly in relation to language policy and implementation in Nigeria. These appear to be needs that are also not being met by NGOs or their donors. Also, from the results, it appears that the senior staff who actually relate more with other operators are better mindful of their numerous, varied roles and the relevance of both foreign and indigenous languages to their operations. The needs identified in table 1 are further analysed in Table 2.

The interesting thing about these needs is that the most important issue to donor agencies for which the highest percentage training distribution is given (Ngeri-Nwagha, 1995) is identified as the least training need. This finding does not, however, negate the importance of report writing in NGO operations. It nevertheless shows that there are pre-requisite needs such as language training and mass literacy even among NGO staff.

Unfortunately, these 2 do not appear to have the least impression on NGOs or donor agencies who must have taken proficiency in these two areas for granted. If these specific language needs are present, how then can training in report/proposal writing and communication skills take care of these basic needs which, if not addressed, will affect the very nature of NGO operations? The mass literacy clamored for by NGO staff is as suggested by Morgan (1992) to encompass more than the 3 'R's', more than literacy, and more than skills development as is currently being done. The other forms of literacy such as the visual and the electronic which concentrate on avenues such as drama, music, jingles, pictures and signs do not in the final analysis downplay

the importance of reading and writing. The quality of literacy provided will determine one's response to post-literacy activities. Literacy and post-literacy activities provided by language education opportunities should be functional so as to be meaningful to the learner. If adequate emphasis is placed on language training, there should be a definite programme designed to combat illiteracy and semi-illiteracy not as an end in itself but as a means of preparing the NGO staff to be more effective and functional.

Ultimately, these language opportunities as well as those offered to the community do not address totally the language needs of would-be NGO staff. This is why respondents (including senior staff) still indicated training needs in all these languages with the addition of Pidgin English.

Language training needs identified in Table 2 by NGO staff have to be addressed not just by including as many languages as possible in the school curriculum but by developing programmes with the following in mind:

NGO operators are workers who can not spend too many hours away from their work. Therefore, the likelihood of going into established institutions for full-time or even part-time studies is not feasible. In the light of this, all-the-year round language training opportunities should be provided either at NGO sites or in designated language centres where time schedules are flexible and learners could be granted day or block release.

i.) Language training programmes should precede workshops being organized on communication skills since language skills and communication skills are not the same and one facilitates the other. As already discussed, communication skills can not be used to replace language skills.

ii.) There should be language specialists who are not necessarily NGO content-related trainers but who could help with the quality of language use in each of these NGOs. The roles of these language specialists are different from those of the various professionals employed for

other various activities. These specialists should be different from communication arts specialists whose tasks in these NGOs centre round the development of Information, Education and Communication materials.

iii.) Attention at this stage should be placed not just on the various languages for the fun of it but on the languages identified as they relate to special purposes. Therefore, the various aspects of the languages of interest should be taught within the context of NGO operations for it to be meaningful and relevant to their needs. This implies that language-related programmes have to be drawn up for them.

FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION

For there to be functional communication in NGOs, the fact that NGO operators engage in the 3 major types or modes of communication 3 the intra personal, inter-personal and mass or group communication - identified by Whetmore (1985 p. 5) should be considered. Consequently, language programmes designed should be mindful of the following:

i.) Without adequate emphasis on post-literacy and language education opportunities for workers on the one hand, and literacy development opportunities for communities and some of the NGO staff on the other hand, there can not be functional communication in NGO operations. The needs of service providers and their beneficiaries must be met in order to promote understanding.

ii.) Daniel and Daniel (1992) stated that acquisition of literacy and job training must affect local and world communities to be meaningful.

iii.) Report writing will not achieve its purpose unless considered within the framework of meaningful, functional communication.

Conclusion

A closer look at post-literacy activities as well as meaningfully packaged and effectively utilized language opportunities will provide the much needed functional communication for NGO operators which will ultimately make their services more effective in their local settings and in the world at large.

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