ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Mobile Phone as A Youth Empowerment Tool for Social Development

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Abstract

Empowerment as a measure designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way. Acting on their own authority makes them stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their lives and rights. At its heart, development – if it is to be sustainable – must be a process that allows people to be their own agents of change: to act individually and collectively using their own ingenuity to access ideas, practices, and knowledge in the search for ways to realise their potential, aspirations and development. Using content analysis, this paper looks at Mobile phones as empowerment tools to achieve social development among young people in Nigeria. The paper finds that mobile phones can empower the youth intellectually, creatively and economically. It therefore concludes that active participation in social development is a necessity for youth empowerment.

Key words: Communication, Participation, Empowerment, Mobile Phones, Development.

Introduction

Communication is at the heart of change and a key indicator of development, but the "trickle-down" model of development reflects the way development is communicated. It is in the way it is designed, developed and transmitted. What exists in such a case is a one way, "top-down" flow of information from government, policy makers or agencies to the people through the television, radio and newspaper. In Nigeria, these media are owned and controlled by the government or the private elite. And since the media changes perceptions of people by giving them information and awareness, whoever controls the materials, will eventually influence the people's thought pattern. This means that a few people sit in their boardrooms and decide the content that goes through these media (Okwori, 1994).

Since development's ultimate goal is human development, it is therefore pertinent to have active participation from the grassroots as against the alienation propagated by the dominant paradigm. Over time, the conventional media had ceased to effect meaningful change as the people have begun to voice that innovations did not belong to them. Herein lies the need for alternative development strategies.

Alternative development suggests a course of development that is need-oriented, endogenous, self-reliant, ecologically sound and based on structural transformation. It is aimed at meeting human needs, endogenously defined and with primary focus on those who have been deprived and exploited. It recognizes the importance of equality, freedom of expression, conviviality and creativity. Each society is left free to operate according to its values and cultures and articulate its own vision of the future. No universal model is to be imposed; each society can build its own. For development, a society has to rely essentially on its inherent strength, although collective self-reliance is not ruled out. Rational utilization of the biosphere is built into the model: outer limits have to be respected and local ecosystems handled with sensitivity (Bittner, 1993, p.16). From the little community to the global human community, structural transformations will be needed to evolve participatory decision-making mechanisms. Capacity for self-governance will have to be

strengthened.

Rogers (1976, p.133) describes this alternative perspective to development as:

> A widely participatory process of social change in society intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other valued equalities) for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment.

Resulting from this new paradigm, the emphasis has been on participatory communication, a communication process that is people oriented and that permits the popular views and feelings of the people to be expressed towards societal growth. For the people's views and aspirations to be expressed and realized, it therefore means a collective participation in the processes of communication to take action that would lead to their own growth and development (Singhal, 2004).

The conventional way of driving change has a limited chance of success because people are rarely factored in the programme design. The critical difference between participatory development and more conventional approaches to development is that it attempts to engage with local people as co-designers, co-analysts, co-planners, co-implementers and co-evaluators (Pretty, 1995, p.145). The basic rule of participation which is handing over the stick is essential to the success of the process.

The right to participate in decision-making is adequately expressed in Article 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This right gives young people a right to express opinions and a right to freedom of expression and information. This right has laid the foundation for governments, organizations and practitioners to lean more towards participation as it recognizes that children and young people have an important contribution to make in the development of policies and services that have an impact on their lives and also, this process gives both government and young people the opportunity to engage with one another. Here arises a need for reconceptualization of approach, an approach that involves exchange of information and an active participation of the people in the process.

The mobile phone has come a long way since it was marketed commercially for the first time. As Goggin (2001) observes, the mobile phone "has become much more than a device for voice calls – it has become a central cultural technology in its own right", being associated more with a person than with a household. Such gadgets have become an omnipresent object, a tool of everyday life. This development is also related to the convergence of the mobile phone with other media such as digital cameras, mp3 players, television, radio, and newspapers. This has resulted in numerous changes in our every-day activities, including being constantly accessible, extending working hours, watching videos away from our home screens, surfing the Internet, and reading news in an electronic form.

Current camera phones have a lot of advantages that distinguish them from the previously existing filming devices: they are omnipresent, allowing users to film spontaneously and unexpectedly; they are a combination of several types of media; and they offer access to the Internet, and content can easily be shared directly from the mobile phone with a local as well as global community. These are exactly the features that distinguish mobile video making from traditional big camera video making – it is highly accessible to anyone in terms of the price of production/distribution and the skills needed to operate it, and also the ways of direct distribution and sharing are broader than within conventional video making.

When people are empowered to know the power of the mobile devices they carry and the magnitude of change they can achieve with these devices by documenting and sharing issues that affect their lives, which will result in behavior change or even serve as an avenue for information decimation, social development would be achieved.

Communication

The past years have witnessed unprecedented

growth in the worldwide spread of electronic mass media, mainly due to the proliferation of communication satellites, along with lowered costs and increased sophistication of receiving equipment. Much of the change was undirected, however, and largely due to the incidental effects of entertainment programming. Its global impact was mainly on people living in industrialised countries, and to a lesser extent those in urban centers of developing countries (Brennan, 2009, 6). By and large, the same pattern of distribution and access has been evident in the 1990's with the emergence of knowledge-based societies increasingly relying on Internet/Web access for information, communication, and entertainment.

Concurrently in developing countries, particularly Asia and Africa which together constitute almost three-quarters of the world's population and where nearly 70% live in the countryside (Brennan, 2009), the idea of using communication for a variety of development projects, grew out of relatively consistent research findings that found that audience-oriented communication strategies could play a catalytic role in accelerating the rate of technology transfer through providing relevant information, changing negative attitudes, and skills training.

Littlejohn (1999, p.67) explains further that:

> Small media were mainly used (e.g., video, radio, flip-charts, illustrated pamphlets, village theatre) appropriate to a given community, province or region. Strategies ranged from multi-media campaigns to support for group meetings conducted by extension agents, and materials to strengthen interpersonal communication. Over time, participatory methods were refined to bring in the views of the intended beneficiaries from the start in designing project goals and selecting appropriate communication approaches to support implementation.

The importance of communication cannot be over-emphasized in participation. Closely linked to this aspect of development are two major trends that have developed over time in the area of communicating development to the people. The first according to Slocum (1995, p.7) is an approach that supports grassroots communication through the use of media forms like community videos, posters and small-scale projects and the other approach supports and relies strongly on the mass media.

Therefore, communication means a process of creating and stimulating understanding as the basis for development rather than information transmission (Abah, 2007). Communication is the articulation of social relations among people. People should not be forced to adopt new practices no matter how beneficial they seem in the eyes of agencies and governments. Instead, people needed to be encouraged to participate rather than adopt new practices based on information.

Youth Participation in Development

Youths are a heterogeneous group, and their life experiences, cultural background, education, gender, social group and economic status can be very different, depending on where they live. Understanding the dynamics of youth in every local context is therefore essential. Each generation of youth faces different challenges, and so when working with, and planning for youth it is important to ask: which youth? This paper focuses on the Nigerian youth.

However, there are some generalizations that can be made, which includes that young people, as with all age groups require continuous recognition and provision of their rights. They may require care and protection, they need support, autonomy, the provision of opportunities, responsibilities, training in marketable skills and empowerment as they emerge to become fully-fledged adults in the society.

Segregation, silencing and gendered disadvantage of young people has been a feature of most societies, traditional and modern. In their life history, a young person goes through multiple transitions: physical, emotional, cognitive and social (Petras, 2004). Without appropriate investment in young people in accordance with their rights, these transitions carry risks.

Youths according to Maguire (2007, p.12).

> …are both tomorrow's leaders, parents, professionals and workers and today's assets. Properly supported and given the right opportunities, girls and boys, young women and young men can play a significant part in lifting themselves, their families and communities out of poverty. Too often, however, youth are considered only or mainly as a problem to be contained; a threat to peace and security.

Nearly 50% of the developing world population are youths and children. There are 1.2 billion 15 to 24 year olds in the world and one billion live in developing countries (UN, 2010). These large numbers of young people are an opportunity, an investment which is why there is a need for their participation in development. This participation in development strengthens young people's abilities to meet their own subsistence needs, it prevents and reduces vulnerabilities to economic, political and socially unstable environments, promotes ownership and sustainability of interventions and also helps them gain entry into target communities and build up trust and social capital.

Young people aged under 30 years make up over 60% of the populations of developing countries, but their needs are being insufficiently addressed or resourced (UN, 2010). Their demographic importance is insufficiently acknowledged. The transition of youth to adulthood is being prolonged or blocked; young people are increasingly unable to attain the social and economic status of adulthood because of structural exclusion and lack of opportunities. Increasing the diversity of young people involved in decision-making processes should be a priority.

Young people's participation is about far more than gathering their views in surveys or listening to limited numbers of representatives. Formal consultation and dialogue is useful to the extent that it guides decisions and genuinely represents a body of opinion and experience. However, it should be part of a process whereby young people progress to greater rights and responsibilities, from being the targets of outreach, to being actively engaged in the planning and implementation of development interventions.

To be able to participate, young people need to be empowered. This involves supporting the development of skills such as working in a group, public speaking, and confidence to be able to communicate and interact with a range of stakeholders. The process of participation and empowerment is not about actions simply prescribed by others. Rather, it cultivates opportunities for young people to develop skills and competencies in a climate of mutual respect and understanding.

Empowerment Discourse

The term empowerment refers to measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority (Wikipedia). Empowerment as action refers both to the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and to recognize and eventually to use their resources and chances (Okwori, 1994).

Empowerment focuses on processes that enable participation, enhance control through shared decision making and create opportunities to learn, practice, and increase skills. Empowerment suggests that engaging youth in pro-social, meaningful, and community-enhancing activities that the youth themselves define and control helps youth gain vital skills, responsibilities, and confidence necessary to become productive and healthy adults.

Youth empowerment is a process where children and young people are encouraged to take charge of their lives. They do this by addressing their situation and then take action in order to improve their access to resources and transform their consciousness through their beliefs, values, and attitudes (Brennan, 2009). Youth empowerment therefore aims to improve quality of life.

As Brennan (2009, p.54) explains:

> Youth empowerment examines six interdependent dimensions: psychological, community, organizational, economic, social and cultural. Psychological empowerment enhances individual's consciousness, belief in self-efficacy, awareness and knowledge of problems and solutions and of how individuals can address problems that harm their quality of life. This dimension aims to create self-confidence and give youth the skills to acquire knowledge. Community empowerment focuses on enhancing the community through leadership development, improving communication, and creating a network of support to mobilize the community to address concerns. Organizational empowerment aims to create a base of resources for a community, including voluntary organizations, unions and association that aim to protect, promote and advocate for the powerless.

He further adds that:

> Economic empowerment teaches entrepreneurial skills, how to take ownership of their assets and how to have income security. Social empowerment teaches youth about social inclusion and literacy as well as helping kids find the resources to be proactive in their communities. Cultural empowerment aims to recreate cultural practices and redefine cultural rules and norms for youth. Through these dimensions of empowerment, programs can work on empowering youth in one or more aspects of their lives (Brennan, 2009, p.54).

This research work focuses on Psychological Empowerment because the beauty of the Mobile phone lies in the fact that the mobile phone user takes the initiative and thinks for himself what he needs to film. It is a process where he takes charge and everyone else steps back. This is thus an empowerment which involves the individual's consciousness, and allow him to think for himself. This process therefore initiates a new methodology that can psychologically empower the youths.

The 53 member countries of the Commonwealth of Nations have all signed up to the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (2007–2015). The Plan of Action underpins the work of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP). On the Commonwealth definition, young people are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of the implications of those choices, make an informed decision freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of those actions. Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others.

Around the globe there are various empowerment programs focused on a wide variety of things. In Namibia for example, one popular empowerment program is Pots of Hope. Pots of Hope's main goal is to reduce the vulnerability of youth to HIV and Aids through education, information and awareness, as well as income security projects. Pots of Hope works by educating, and providing counseling to those in rural settings who do not have access to those resources. This program focuses on organizational empowerment within the community (UN, 2010).

It is believed that when people own the process of development, it leads to sustainability. Hence the need to empower them to take the initiatives themselves by handing them the tools, in this case, the camera. And because having access to a camera is easy, as almost everyone owns a mobile phone, the process can continue even after the research as the youths can continue to film their situations and post on the social media which is quite easy these days. This can also borrow into the new initiative of mobile firsts being adopted by some organizations where young people are encouraged to use their

mobile phones to record their realities and post on the social media groups.

If the process is followed through to the end, then the youths will begin to have access to the global world and begin to voice their problems and issues to the world, thereby competing with their counterparts in other countries. It will become an avenue where they can compete favorably in-terms of development and this is ultimately the empowerment that will be achieved from the process.

"Mobile First": Empowerment through Mobile Phones

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have had a profound impact on the political, economic and social sectors of many countries (UN, 2010). Mobile communication has become essential to the functioning of economies, linking markets and consumers and facilitating the sharing of information. As mobile networks expand, opportunities are presented for the dissemination of information leading to equitable and sustainable economic growth in developing and developed markets.

The increasing ubiquity of mobile phones, is enabling communities to access and share information cheaply, quickly and in greater amounts than ever before. The increasing ability of communities to access information via mobiles can be used to address political or social concerns, with youth playing a leading role. Halewood and Kenny (2008) comment that young people are often first adopters of new technologies particularly broadcast technologies such as mobile phones. Mobile phone usage presents opportunities and challenges in addressing the social development and inclusion of youth. They create channels of cooperation, dialogue and information exchange between young people and their communities (UN, 2010). McKinsey (2013), in discussing the expansion of mobile phone coverage in Africa, notes the role of a rising middle class and a large youth population that is embracing technology, and expanding coverage all over the world.

In processes of participation, deliberation, priority setting and monitoring, ICT, particularly mobile phones and social media, is a powerful enabler of youth engagement in governance decisions. For example, ICT can be utilized to measure and quantify the results of youth-focused urban initiatives, thereby helping to demonstrate impact and compensate for resource constraints.

Ben-Attar and Campbell (2012, 28) note that ICT can be a tool for addressing youth issues but require the complementary development of youth-oriented policies and programmes that view the young as assets in development as well as youth oriented budgets. They conclude that mobilising political will is imperative to meaningfully engaging with the youths and leveraging the potential of mobile technology. Ben-Attar and Campbell (2012) suggest that improving outcomes for youth in governance processes and services is dependent on improved sensitisation and capacity building at local government level.

The use of ICTs by the youth is considered to have wide-ranging effects on youth transitions. Hanna (2009) comments that ICTs, particularly mobile phones, offer unprecedented opportunities for accessing and disseminating information, leveraging opportunities and providing support for young people. Mobile phones and social media offer one means of potentially improving outcomes for youths by enabling them to obtain and access information in a faster and more transparent manner. This, in turn, enables governments to better understand the status, needs and potential of youth.

Conversely, youth groups are more aware of the limitations and possibilities of local governments in providing services. User-generated content among youths is a key ingredient of this process. The sharing of information is empowering youths to civic action. ICTs, particularly mobile phones and social media, allow for the effective scaling-up of youth participation efforts and their increased inclusion.

An example is the Learning about Living (LaL) project, which was coordinated by One World UK (OWUK) and initially piloted in Lagos and Cross River States, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria, from 2007-2009. The project

involved the development and implementation of an e-learning system based on the Nigerian Family Life and HIV/AIDS Education (FLHE) curriculum. An associated mobile component comprising a question and answer service and a competition was used to further engage young people.

The stated mission of LaL was "to leverage cross-media ICT innovatively to promote sexuality education, gender empowerment and life skills among young people in Nigeria" (Oneworld, 2009). The overarching goal of the project was to contribute to the reduction in prevalence of sexual reproductive health (SRH) issues, HIV/AIDS and gender violence among young people in Nigeria by improving access to accurate and appropriate information through ICT. Specifically, the project was designed to assist the teaching of SRH issues in schools and community centres through a digital version of the national FLHE curriculum.

Supported by mobile phone services which allow young people to anonymously text or call trained counsellors, LaL aimed to extend the reach and impact of SRH education in Nigeria by: Utilising ICT to equip young people with the relevant skills to enable them make informed decisions about their sexual health, prevent HIV/AIDS and gender based violence, and associated mortality and morbidity, especially maternal mortality (Oneworld, 2009).

It also aimed to improve discussion and information on reproductive health education and reduce socio- cultural tendencies that lead to a reluctance to discuss these issues amongst young people. To increase gender equality by reducing the prevalence of and offering positive alternatives to gender constructs that assume male superiority and the acceptability of violence against women in Nigerian society.

The evaluation concluded that LaL had performed well in achieving its core mandate of using ICT to provide young people with accurate information about sexual and reproductive health/HIV/AIDS and gender empowerment. The project also demonstrated that mobile phones and social media interventions could work given the right support environment.

The Mobile firsts on the other hand are videos that follow an approach, which promotes developing content using mobile devices and designing content so that it can be accessed via mobile phones. Audiences worldwide are now mobile first. They're watching videos while waiting for a bus, at their desk, and passing content round the classroom. It brings the screen to our hands. Take Facebook for example, there are eight billion video views and 100 million hours of video watched daily on the platform (Wikipedia). Most of these are viewed on mobile.

An example of a Mobile First initiative is the Health Communication Capacity Collaborative (HC3) a five-year, global project funded by USAID, and based at the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (CCP) in Nigeria. The project is designed to strengthen developing country capacity to implement state-of-the-art health communication programs.

One focus of the HC3 portfolio is the promotion of long-acting reversible contraception (LARC), which includes the intrauterine device (IUD) and the implant. Despite being the most effective modern contraceptive method, LARCs remain scarcely used by youth ages 15 to 24, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. A 2014 literature scan conducted by HC3 revealed prevalent barriers to LARC uptake among youth included. To address the barriers, HC3 developed a collection of tools to be used and adapted by program managers who work with healthcare providers and youth on Family Planning topics (HC3, 2014).

A major tool used was a series of short videos produced, received and shared via mobile phones. The videos – named Youth Voices – presented information about accessing and using LARCs through personal stories and sample dialogues which directly address beliefs and misconceptions, and also modelled skills such as talking with a partner or a provider about LARCs. The Youth Voices videos targeted young women (18-24 years, who are married or unmarried, may or may not have children) to present LARCs as a safe, highly effective and viable choice. They provided information on

LARCs and other contraceptive methods, as well as introduce skills to increase young women's self-efficacy to choose and use a method that is best for them.

The Youth Voices approach was piloted in Nigeria to assess how the video process is followed and understood, and identify areas for improvement. The process of developing video content and making any potential adjustments to ensure that the videos are locally relevant and appropriate. One goal of the project is to encourage and inspire youth-focused groups to produce and share their own Youth Voices Videos. As such, HC3 developed a guide that outlined the process of developing content, through to recording and producing their own videos.

Conclusion

Communication is the pulse of development communication and it is the key to developing successful empowerment projects, with sustainable and far reaching impacts. Active participation will give a voice to marginalized groups. There is a need for a non-threatening, more interactive and inclusive method for youth empowerment for effective development. The mobile phone is key to this process as it has become much more than a device for voice calls – it has become a central cultural technology in its own right. This paper posits that, ultimately, the way forward for social development is through participatory means of communicating development and the youths in Nigeria need to be empowered to make decisions that affect their lives. After all, for a society to develop, it must be able to carry every stakeholders along.

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