Communication Approaches to Peace Building in Nigeria

Edited By
Des Wilson, Ph.D

African Council for Communication Education
2009

Communication, Youth Empowerment, and Peace Building in Nigeria

7

Farinde Kehinde Opeyemi

Introduction

Youths are one of the greatest assets that any nation can have. Not only are they legitimately regarded as the future leaders; they are, potentially and actually, the greatest investment for a country's development. They serve as a good measure of the extent to which a country can reproduce as well as sustain itself. The extent of their vitality, responsible conduct, and roles in society is positively correlated with the development and peace of their country. All youths are not the same, nor are their experiences, and the concept of youth is itself debated: some favor biological markers, in which youth is the period between puberty and parenthood, while others define youth in terms of cultural markers—a distinct social status with specific roles, rituals, and relationships.

For the purpose of this discourse, youths are defined as having reached the stage in life where they are physically capable of assuming adult roles (i.e. have passed puberty) but would generally not be expected to make decisions or provide support for others. That is, they have left behind childhood but have not yet assumed the responsibilities of adulthood. In terms of age, according to the United Nations, this is usually between 15 and 24 years. According to the National Policy on Youth in Nigeria, it is usually between the age 18 and 35. Indeed, in societies subject to crises or upheavals, the concept of youth may radically alter as boys and girls are forced to take on adult responsibilities at a very young age. Through their creative talents and labour power, a nation makes giant strides in economic development and socio-political attainments. In their dreams and hopes, a nation establishes its motivation on their energies and builds

its vitality and purpose. And because of their dreams and aspirations, the future of a nation is assured.

It is for this reason that we have to address the issue of how best to harness the creative energies and dynamism of youths for overall national development and peace building through communication and youth empowerment. These stem from the conviction that youth constitute Nigeria's only real hope for a great future.

Communication, Youth Empowerment and Peace Building

Peace is not just an absence of war, but also a state of mind, individual or collective, a social, cultural, political, and economic harmony. Peace is also a way of being, a way of living. Hence, to build a true culture of peace there is need to develop justice, have respect for human rights, and fight against poverty, and unemployment. There is also the need to favour intercultural/links and to empower youth, the minorities and fight marginalization and exclusion. (Anderson, 2004).

Peace building centers on values of empowerment and self-determination. Clearly, peace building efforts should aim to persuade rather than force or manipulate people to change. When people's cognition, attitudes, or behaviours change by their own choice, as a result of persuasion, the changes are more likely to endure than if the changes were brought about by force or manipulation. Peace building addresses the challenges of comprehending and responding to transformations in war-torn societies. Peace building deals not only with rebuilding the physical infrastructure of societies, but also with the less tangible, but equally or even more significant, social and civil consequences of post-conflict reconstruction. Such activities lay at the foundations of coexistence, cooperation, and reconciliation in areas of conflict or tension. (Miall, 2000).

The primary means for peace building is the fostering of communication. Communication between leaders, and their citizens, and among youth from different sides of conflict through strategic relationships, information sharing, and recreational activities. Peace building products can include physical products (building a mediation center); services (using a mediation service, taking a peace building training course, or joining a dialogue group); practices (talking to neighbors, or those of different religions); or more intangible ideas like creating a culture of peace.

For example, in a peace building project, encouraging youth in a community to join a youth dialogue group, the 'product' is the dialogue group. A marketing campaign to encourage youths to join the dialogue group needs to think about how the product meets the interests of youth in that community. Is the product attractive? Is it in the youth's interests? Media could be used to attract specific target groups to join a dialogue programme. Like selling a product, the media would sell the idea of joining the dialogue by highlighting the benefits of participating and possibly the costs or risks of not joining in a dialogue.

Conflict prevention and peace building practitioners can best utilize the media if they are clear about their goal (their product) and also know who, specifically; they want to communicate to through the media. Social marketing is never aimed at the 'general public.' A sophisticated and strategic use of the media is more focused on particular targets and segmented audiences. For example, if the goal of a social marketing campaign is to stop littering, first, research needs to be done to determine who is littering the most. In many cultures, young men are the chief culprits.

In this case, young men are the 'target audience.' Successful media campaigns aimed at stopping littering use specific messages like 'littering isn't cool' and target magazines, radio programmes and billboards seen by young pepole. If a peace building organization wants to promote

cross cultural dialogue between ethnic groups, they should think about who, in particular, they would like to join the dialogue. The media can be used successfully only when peace building organizations have done the hard work to narrow down their goals and target audiences.

Knowing the specific goals and the audiences required to meet their goal enables peace building professionals to be more sophisticated in their choice of when and where to use the media. The media can help achieve goals in conflict prevention and peace building when paired with approaches or strategies. The media are not appropriate for all peace building efforts however.

Highly-sensitive negotiations, for example, are often best kept quiet without the pressure brought by media seeking to highlight areas of conflict (which helps them sell their media products) rather than serve to foster a focus on common ground, a problem-solving orientation, and hopefulness required for diplomacy.

The Use of Communication for Peace

Communication is ubiquitous. It takes place everywhere, everyday, and every time. It is all around us. Every one of us engages in communication either with oneself or one another at home, in the office, at school, in business and industry. Communication is something that people do. It is based on relationship. This relationship may exist between two persons, or between one person and many. (Daramola, 2003).

The word communication has several meanings, depending on the context and the purpose; hence there is no acceptable definition of communication. Littlejohn (1992) for example sees communication as one of the most pervasive, important, and complex clusters of behaviour. As a social science, he pointed out that communication involves understanding how people behave in creating, exchanging, and interpreting messages.

The media can provide the channels of communication for the parties involved in conflict to enhance peace. When people are provided the avenue to express their grievances and are listened to, the atmosphere for resolution is created. As Olagunju (2002) points out, the simple secret of mediation is in putting both sides in a forum where they are able to listen to each other with empathy. Effective communication is essential in non-violent conflict management. Scott and Brydon (2007) observe that communication is also a non-adversarial and cheap way of preventing and removing conflict situations available to the parties in a conflict. They observe that once communication is destroyed, the parties may get into deeper disagreement that may not be easily resolved.

A lot can be achieved in the communication process. The feedbacks can be signals for more communication that will finally get the parties to the negotiating table. Openness in communication can reduce suspicion and doubt over contested issues and build up trust. Trust is needed to build up the peace agenda. The media have the capacity to provide the emotional outlet for the parties to voice out their grievances. In addition, a media report has the potential to weaken the position of the strong party or strengthen the position of the weak party in the eyes of the public, thus encouraging the parties to seek peace, which otherwise they would not have done if the media had not provided the channels of communication.(Benvenuti, 2003).

The media can be used to change the *information environment* of the people by changing or improving their knowledge base. Education transforms the minds of the recipients. The media can consciously frame the situation in the Niger Delta to enhance the public understanding of the key issues. By so doing, the media can be used to re-educate the people by correcting the mis-conceptions of all the parties involved. Their reversal of views is a step to the

prevention and resolution of more conflicts. The media can also been seen as:

Solution Generator: Media can generate solutions to any crisis experienced by the youth by pressing the parties and the public for their proffered solutions. The situation can be managed when the media provide the fora to elicit ideas to solve the present challenge. Conflicts get resolved when possible solutions to grievances are considered. The media can publicize seminars, workshops, conferences, competitions and other brain storming activities to harvest ideas that can solve the crisis.

Information Provider and Interpreter: The media provide people with important information about their environment (e.g. political, cultural, social issues) and respond to more imminent problems (weather, traffic, natural catastrophes, etc.). At least in part, people make decisions about whether to dress warm or cold, choose political leaders in elections, and judge other groups in society based on media messages. The media interpret events beyond our immediate realm and help us make sense of them. With the improvement of technologies and the advancement of new media such as the Internet, the media play an increasingly more prominent role in our daily communication and entertainment.

Media as Watchdog: The media sometimes act as a third party - a 'watchdog' which provides feedback to the public on local problems. Media can bring hidden stories out into the public. Investigative reports can bring to the fore public problems.

Media as Gatekeeper: The media can also act as a gatekeeper that sets agenda, filters issues and tries to maintain a balance of views. The media like to portray themselves as 'balanced and fair,' even when they privately seek to promote a particular ideological set of ideas and limit the public's exposure to a wide array of information. In 2006,

a cartoonist in Denmark created international conflict with his message about Islam. The global tension prompted extensive analysis on how and when media professionals should act as gatekeepers to prevent certain expressions that could be deemed offensive to some groups.

Media as Peace Promoter: Media events can be used at the beginning of negotiations to build confidence, facilitate negotiations or break diplomatic deadlocks to create a climate conducive to negotiation. Media events such as press releases, rock concerts, or radio programmes can celebrate peace agreements and negotiations. The media events may help to promote and mobilize public support for agreements, (Howard, 2003).

Rights of the Youth

The rights, responsibilities and obligations of the Nigerian youth are contextualized in the provisions of Chapter Four of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which itemizes the fundamental human rights of Nigerian citizens. So do the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the African Charter of Human and Peoples Rights.

Among the most important of these rights which the youth shall equally enjoy are the following: Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of thought and religion, Freedom of association, Freedom of movement, Right to security of life and property, and Right to proper education and training. Others are: Right to leisure, cultural and sporting activities, Right to equal opportunities in employment and access to social services, Right to adequate shelter, health-care, social and food security, Right to be protected from any form of harassment and degrading, cruel, and inhuman treatment, and torture, and Right to protection against the dangers of substance abuse, alcoholism, sexual harassment and exploitation, HIV/AIDS, secret cults, and gender discrimination. Yet others include the Right to

participate in decision making in matters that affect them, Right to privacy, family life and non-interference in personal matters such as correspondence, Right to a good and clean environment, Right to equal protection under the law, Right to participate in National Development including matters that affect them, Right to be protected against harmful traditional practices, Right to survival and social, economic and cultural development, and in the case of the disabled, the right to be provided with the special treatment which his/her condition requires. (*Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999*).

The Role of Nigerian Youth in Peace Building

Every set of rights that a person enjoys has a corresponding set of obligations. One crucial way of achieving peace is the approach of dialogue, love and mutual respect for one another. The role of youth in peace building must be one that incorporates youth and mainstreams them into all major programmes that affect social change. Effective mainstreaming and development strategies must be embedded in concrete actions and programmes which are clearly defined as working strategies of governments. Such concrete strategies and programmes must be in areas like governance, agriculture, health, education, economy, industry, and environment. Youths must be equal partners in the formulation and execution of all government policies.

In empowering the youth, they should also be assisted to promote and defend the democracy and civility in the governance of the country and in interpersonal relations with fellow citizens, eschewing ethnic and religious bigotry. They equally must refrain from all acts of violence and crimes, such as cultism, armed robbery, street violence, alcoholism, substance abuse, and prostitution. The youth should also actively be involved in the promotion of national unity, national reconciliation, peaceful coexistence and good neighbourliness and in the promotion of self-help, self-

respectability, cooperation and community development. (Lowicki, 2002).

Obligations of government, parents, and guardians toward the Youths

The government, parents and guardians have obligations to ensure that youths are empowered to discharge their obligations to society. They have a responsibility to create the enabling environment for the right kind of orientation, education, and psychological conditioning for the youth. Their obligations include the following:

- Provide conducive atmosphere for the mental, emotional and physical development of the young persons.

- Nurture the youth in warmth and affection in an atmosphere of peace and harmony.

- Constantly provide counseling, support and guidance in accordance with their specific and personal needs.

- Provide shining role models for the youths through responsible and ethical conduct and leadership by example.

- Create opportunities for the youth to be involved in making decisions that affect them, the environment, and society.

- Teach human rights values, social justice, equity, fairness and gender equality.

- Recognize their capacities, their individualities, according to age and maturity, and allow whenever possible their choice of educational fields and careers.

- Provide adequate funding for education and equal opportunities at all levels of education.

- Provide adequate funding for sustainable youth development projects.

Conclusion

Nigerian youths have great aspirations and expectations. They are already frustrated with the slow and ineffective manner in which the successive governments they look up to with anticipation have mishandled the actualization of their aspirations. The path to achieving peace should not and cannot be subjective because peace can be enhanced by dialogue. Violence before peace will not suffice, as many lives would have been lost in the process. We must recognize the sanctity of human life. Many leaders in the world have always talked about peace but how they think this can be achieved is a different matter. Bombs are thrown at one another to bring about peace. Fighting does not lead to peace but leads to disharmony. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. What is meant here is that because the end which is in view, is pre-existent in the means, destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends.

The Nigerian Civil War for example, forced us into one nation. That was the main benefit, but many saw machine guns and bombs for the first time during that war. They did not only hear the sounds of war, but they saw the dead, the killers, and the people they maimed. Some did not stop there; they went further to procure the guns. In Nigeria today, human lives do not mean much for some people anymore and robbing at gunpoint is a daily occurrence. What is the solution? Dialogue is the solution. Love is the solution. The solution is making each other see viewpoints that may not be ours. The solution lies in persuasion and shifting of grounds, even if it is for humanity's sake! The solution lies in respect for human lives and in doing unto others, as we would like

them to do unto us.

References

Anderson, (2004). *Reflecting on peace practice.* USA: Collaborative for Development Action. Retrieved June 2008 from www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/manual/

Bannon, I. (2004). "Development: The neglected road to peace ". *The transatlantic Quarterly.* Summer.

Benvenuti, P. (2003). *Youth violence and delinquency in the Latin region,* Thesis, London School of Economics, London.

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999.

Daramola, I. (2003). Introduction to mass communication. Lagos: Rothan Press Limited. ·

FGN (2001). National youth development policy, programmes and implementation strategies.

Howard, R. (2003). *The power of the media: A handbook for peace-builders.* Netherlands: European Centre for Conflict Prevention.

Lowicki, J. (2002). "Beyond consultation: In support of more meaningful adolescent participation." *Forced Migration Review.* October 2002.

Miall, H. (2000). *What do peace studies contribute distinctively to the study of peace?* A paper presented at BISA Conference, Bradford: The Richardson Institute, Lancaster University.

Scott, M. & Brydon, R. (2007). *Dimensions of communication: An introduction.* Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.