

Language as a Tool for Rural Community Sustainability in a Pandemic

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Abstract

Poor infrastructure, high population density, high level of illiteracy, extreme poverty, rural - urban migration, who will care for the elderly, falling house values and low social interaction, have been identified as the major challenges of rural development and sustainability. Nevertheless, all these challenges exert gradual impact on the community dwellers. There is, however, a devastating challenge whose impact is so swift that whole communities can be wiped out if not rapidly controlled. This challenge is called pandemic. Using the COVID - 19 pandemic as an example, this paper aims at highlighting the importance of language as a veritable tool for sustainability in the rural communities during a pandemic. 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.

Key words: pandemic, language, rural community, sustainability. Community mobilisation

Introduction

Poor infrastructure, high population density in some cases, decreasing population in other cases, high level of illiteracy, extreme poverty, economic stagnation, rural urban migration, who will care for the elderly, falling house values, low social interaction, agricultural security and abandonment of arable land, have been identified as the major challenges of rural development and sustainability. (Eimermann, et al 2017; Niedomysl & Amcoff 2011; Hedlund & Lundholm, 2015; Lundmark, 2009). Nevertheless, all these challenges exert gradual impact on the community dwellers. There is, however, a devastating challenge whose impact is so swift that whole communities can be wiped out if not rapidly controlled. This challenge is called *pandemic*. The COVID-19 pandemic gives us a clear picture of this phenomenon.

Even though many countries have pandemic plans, following the experience of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003, (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005), and the World Health Organisation updated the International Health Registration (IHR), COVID-19 caught the whole world unawares, its devastating effect reaching the nooks and crannies of world communities. This means that pandemics will always hit the world from time to time and that it is very difficult to control and contain satisfactorily. In 2019, the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) began to monitor the outbreak of the new coronavirus, SARS-COV-2, which causes the respiratory illness which was later 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).

As observed by Jones et al, (2008) and Morse, (1995), the likelihood of pandemics has increased to a larger extent due to greater exploitation of the natural environment, changes in land use, increase in travel, integration and urbanization. Thus, it becomes pertinent for governments to devise means of preserving rural communities during pandemics as they are usually the most vulnerable, since control measures usually focus on the urban communities, probably due to the large population. There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way of life of many people and communities. Although technology had been in existence years earlier, COVID-19 forced many countries, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, to incorporate it into the school system. COVID-19 forced countries to change from the analogue system of teaching and learning, to the digital way of electronic learning. The change cut across all human activities. From working from home to adapting to online classes, no person was spared from the change. (Burayak, 2020). For many people, the change was packed with positive results but for many others, their losses are still being counted. However, the changes varied in dimension from place to place. The effects of any pandemic in the cities are quite different from those of the rural areas because the needs of the rural dwellers differ from the needs of the urban centres. Olanipekun (2015) 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.

A community is considered to be rural when it lacks the basic social amenities like good roads and schools, pipe - borne water, electricity, Internet facilities and good hospitals. The rate of development is very slow. Rural development, as explained by Sears et al (1992) comprises actions and conditions that improves the standard of people in the rural area and the communities where they live. It is also a method of intervention by the state in under - developed countries that translates as improvement in the quality of life and economic wellbeing of rural areas (Bagla, 2018).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the whole world 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, spoken or unspoken. 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 in Nigeria. 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. In Nigeria, for example, National Youth Corps members, face this problem when they serve in rural areas. Resultantly, information about the COVID-19 pandemic in such areas were usually outdated, distorted, exaggerated, embellished and watered down. If the information received was that the virus had been arrested, people would stop observing the COVID-19 protocol such as avoiding crowds. This could result to mass infection and subsequent deaths. If the information said infection could be caused by eating the staple foods available in the communities, there would be an outbreak of panic and confusion. Thus, the way language is used for information dissemination in a 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.

Clarification of terms and Review of relevant Literature

There are five key words in this article and we shall attempt to explain them briefly before the literature review.

Pandemic

This is a phenomenon that has many definitions and explanations. Porta (2014) and Robinson (2022), assert that an epidemic is the occurrence of cases of an illness in a community or region that is clearly in excess of what usually happens whereas a pandemic is an epidemic that occurs over a very wide area, usually affecting a large number of people and even crossing international boundaries. For Madhav et al (2017), a pandemic is a large – scale outbreak of infectious disease over a wide geographic area that not only claims the lives of many people at the same time but also causes significant political, economic and social disruption. However, the definition by Robinson (2022) is the one considered most suitable in this discussion. He differentiates between three related phenomena that seem to have the same meaning but are actually not synonyms. These are outbreak, epidemic and pandemic.

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He explains that an outbreak occurs when an illness happens in unexpected high numbers and may extend more widely or be confined to one area. It can last for a few days or years. Concerning an epidemic, he asserts that this occurs when an infectious disease spreads quickly to more people than experts would expect and affects a larger area than an outbreak. A pandemic, on the other hand, is a disease outbreak that spreads across countries and continents. It takes more lives and affects more people than an epidemic. He concludes by acknowledging that the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic.

Language

This is also a concept that has multiple definitions but is generally accepted by language scholars as a rule - based system of signs that enables communication. It is an instrument that enables human beings to thrive economically, socially, politically and culturally, (Bazimaziki, 2023). Linguistic scholars like Noam Chomsky, Edward Sapir and E. T. Hall, have attempted to define the concept. Edward Sapir (1884-1939), for example, 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). However, as Alshami (2019) rightly observes, defining language is not an easy job because a deep analysis of these various definitions show that each is incomplete in one respect or other. He then attempts to define language as a “a means of conveying our thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions to other people”. Language reflects both the individual characteristics of a person, as well as beliefs and practices of his or her community. (Amberg & Vause, n. d.). For Rabiah (2012), language is simply a communication tool. 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).

Rural community

Rural communities are not easy to define because the rate of transition from rural to urban areas is usually abrupt in developing nations whereas it is a gradual process in developed countries. The rate of transition in developing countries depends entirely on the government of the day. Another obvious reason for the difficulty in defining this concept is that governments do not use the same statistical criteria for grouping rural and urban population. 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. (Wikipedia)

Community mobilisation

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.

Sustainability

Sustainability, on the other hand, means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

(<https://www.mcgill.ca>). The development which meets the development of the present generation without damaging the health of the future generations is termed sustainable development (Anable, et al, 2006).

Review of relevant Literature

The world has witnessed quite a number of pandemics. Influenza, (such as Swine Influenza and Avian Influenza), are usually associated with the appearing of an antigenically variant influenza virus that people have no former immunity. (Treanor, 2015). Pandemics, like the 1918 h1n1 influenza, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), as well as the more recent Coronavirus (COVID 19), are examples of global calamities which have significantly changed the methods of delivery of healthcare as well as surgical measures (Stewart & Stawicki, 2024). As stated earlier in the introduction, the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003 together with growing fears about Avian Influenza made many countries to come up with pandemic plans, (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). When SARS broke out in 2003, many countries that experienced it delayed in reporting the cases. It was this delay, according to WHO (2005), that made the World Health Assembly to update the International Health Registration (IHR) which made it mandatory for all member states of the World Health Organisation to meet specific standards for reporting, detecting and responding to outbreaks. It was this updating of the IHR standard that helped in the reduction of the impact of the 2009 influenza pandemic, (Katz, 2009). In spite of this updating, nevertheless, the lapses in the IHR were exposed by the 2014 West Africa Ebola, (Moon et al, 2015; Pathmanathan et al, 2014).

The devastating effect of pandemics on large regions and populations as well as the duration of their impact makes them a huge challenge for emergency response, (Kappler & Davis, 2024). Thus pandemics have forced people all over the world to break with the past and see their world differently and the COVID-19 became a gateway of sorts, between one world and the next, (Zirpe & Gurav, 2022). In the wake of a pandemic, interventions, preventive and curative measures discovered are always directed more on the urban dwellers while the left over are later sent to the rural dwellers, sometimes when the death toll had reached unimaginable dimensions. The rural dwellers themselves, most of the time, work out survival measures while waiting for government interventions. Mobilization therefore, becomes crucial in ensuring sustainability in rural communities. This is because, as asserted by Bassey & Ottong (2015):

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. Fake news is rampant in rural areas due to high level of illiteracy because the educated youths tend to migrate to the cities. This is because residents of rural areas learn from a very young age that to be successful, they must leave the rural locality, (Lowery et al, 2021). Corbett (2007), associates rural regions' brain drain to the educational system which tends to teach that lifestyles of the rural areas are not valuable. This results in lifestyle mobilities. Lifestyle mobilities refer to long - term mobility such as temporal, return, seasonal, permanent and residential migration. (Akerlund, 2013; Cohen et al, 2015; Eimermann, 2017; O'Reilly, 2003). Lifestyle movers are people who move for short or long periods to places that offer opportunities for a better quality of and enhance self –

actualization. (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; 2016; Cohen et al 2015). Therefore, rural development is difficult. Thus global communities must find new ways of preserving their global communities since pandemics are inevitable.

The Place of Leadership in Rural Communities in a Pandemic

Talking about leadership, Burayang (2021) asserts that:

a leader must possess the ability to respond and take action to form better solutions, possess empathy and vulnerability to help the community. Leaders equipped with compassion can put themselves in the shoes of others and understand their needs, willingness to collaborate for impactful investments.

From the fore-going, 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 et al, 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). Leadership and management are considered to be synonyms as they both have to do with controlling and guiding a group of people with the aim of achieving a specific goal. However, Omolawal (2016) asserts that the two concepts are different because leadership inspires whereas management plans, managers give directives while leaders ask questions, managers find fault while leaders praise, and so on.

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). Communication is all about human interaction, transfer of information to effect or influence, and mutual understanding between communities (Craig: 2017). Language, according to Ofuani & 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

Rabiah (2012), identifies the following functions of language:

- Regulatory function (controlling an event such as rejection or approval)
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- Representational function (presenting facts or making statements)
- Instrumental function (manipulating the environment to lead to a particular situation)
- Interactional function (maintain relationships so as to keep communication alive)
- Imaginative function (to create imaginative ideas or a system)
- Heuristic function (acquisition of knowledge)
- Personal function (to express feelings and emotions).

All the above - stated functions of language are crucial in the preservation of rural communities during a pandemic. Below are some of the ways this can be done:

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) in Nigeria for example, 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 was a preponderance of fabricated lies, deceptions and misinformation on the social media about the COVID-19 vaccines. There were 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 caused a lot of panic among the citizens, especially those who had 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 (Basse & 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). 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 Nigerian Centre for Disease Control during the COCID – 19 pandemic:

- * 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 has been an attempt to emphasise the role of language in sustaining rural communities in a pandemic. 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. On the other hand, if wrongly used, language can result to chaos, fear, panic, and ultimately, the extinction of rural communities. The paper found out that pandemics are part of human existence and that governments may not be able to stop them from striking from time to time. It also found that during pandemics rural communities are usually attended to late as government interventions are usually geared towards the urban largely populated areas. The paper concludes that rural dwellers themselves must make concerted efforts by themselves,

through proper language use, to ensure their sustainability while waiting for government intervention.

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