

Functional Communication in Non-Governmental Organizations: Challenges for Post Literacy Development, Language Education Opportunities and Wider International Relations

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ABSTRACT The present study examines the Nigerian situation in relation to its communication needs vis-à-vis the language needs of the fast growing 'third sector', that is, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). An examination of the specific, double-faceted responsibilities of NGOs reveals different language needs from those of the first two – public and private sectors. What these double-faceted responsibilities are and the challenges they have for literacy development and language use are the focus of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Farrington et al. (1993: 14) have identified two firmly established sectors with a not-so established one in the society. The first two are the public and private sectors while the latter comprises the Non-Governmental Organizations (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 two firmly established sectors with marked responsibilities. This role is nevertheless not limited to the sectors already identified.

Societies are made up of people with developmental needs and the inability of the society to satisfy these needs leads to problems. One of such developmental problems affecting people worldwide is poverty. Poverty, according to Onibokun (1996), is a lack of access not only to money but to many things. If current global trends are unchecked, about 1.5 billion people may be living below the poverty line by the year 2025 (CONNOHPD, 1996). The NGOs again become a 'missing link' between the government and the poor with marked responsibilities. These double-faceted responsibilities pose challenges for literacy development and language use policies in Nigeria. Since the establishment of NGOs is

relatively new in comparison to the public and private sectors and not yet rigidly established, an understanding of their operations and their needs is necessary in order that they might enjoy effective and relevant services which will help them achieve their vision and mission.

Non-Governmental Organizations

There is no gain-saying the fact that NGOs are expanding by leaps and bounds thereby entrenching their presence not only world-wide but into the very fabric of the Nigerian culture. According to Ngeri-Nwagha (1995), though by 1940 there were already seven NGOs, many of the NGOs in Nigeria today have only been established within the last few years. 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 need which the NGOs are trying to fill. Ngeri-Nwagha (1995: 9) states that:

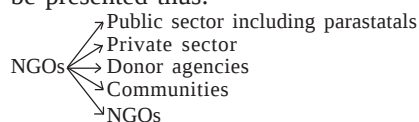
"NGOs have a comparative advantage as effective agents of development because of their relative administrative simplicity, their proxi-

mity to the grassroots, their ability to identify the felt needs of the people and their efficient and cost effective mode of operation...

Wellard and Copestake (1993: 4) state that NGOs in their capacity for technology generation and dissemination,

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

From the definitions above, it becomes clear that NGOs are development-oriented. However, unlike the two other sectors, their very existence is collaborative and dependent on funding from donor agencies. Their areas of operation could be presented thus:



The successes recorded in their development-oriented activities depend on their recognition of the different characteristics of these areas of operation. Consequently, Carroll (1992), Farrington (1993) have observed that many issues need to be resolved for NGOs to become more widespread and effective in their provision of services and their energization of societies. Likewise Onibokun (1996) refers to managerial and technical inadequacies confronting 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) when he states 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 and influence provision of services and other things. Emphasis placed on proposal writing and communication is justified taking a look at the percentage training distri-

bution for Nigeria highlighted by Ngeri-Nwagha (1995: 453) reproduced below:

Proposal/Report Writing	35.4%
Financial Management	26.11%
Program Management	35.04%
Leadership	43.81%
Technical	26.55%
Communication/Information	26.99%
Other	25.66%

Nevertheless, are all that are needed, particularly in relation to language and communication, a part of this distribution? Are the things needed fully understood by NGO operators? There can be no development without a careful consideration of the issue of language at the micro level and communication at the macro level not only in relation to the communities but also in relation to the other collaborators, particularly the donor agencies.

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. By its very nature, communication is meant to be functional since it is a means to an end. Communication is undertaken with a view to understanding. 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 assuming that communication is taking place. Stanton (1982: 29) states that: "Approximately seventy per cent 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".

This erroneous assumption stems partially from the fact that we assume that those in the NGO operations have received some form of education which should enable them to communicate effectively. According to Wood (1977) this assumption is not even true concerning native language users who are still struggling to master appropriate and effective communication even for every day use. How much more for specialized NGO operations? Verbal communication-associated problems could therefore be a major barrier to effective and efficient NGO operations.

A look at the array of areas 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 percentage distribution of funds. Yet, emphasis has been placed on these areas due to a major assumption that the pre-requisite language needs are already there in NGO operators. Is this really so? This study attempted to find out the true situation of language use in a number of local NGOs.

METHODOLOGY

Observation and questioning techniques were used to solicit required information. Observation was carried out in three 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 was resorted to after futile attempts to retrieve the questionnaires 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 consequently their 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 analyzed using mean scores and percentages. All but one of the senior staff respondents affirmed that there were language needs. Further analyses on language 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

NGOs used for the study are situated. The responses regarding pidgin and the local languages are also in line 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 give food for thought. These appear to be needs that are not being met by donor agencies. These needs are broken down as shown in table 2.

The most interesting thing about these needs is that the most important thing 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 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 two do not appear to have the least impression on donor agencies who must have taken adequacy in these two areas for granted. If these specific language needs are there, 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?

Literacy, Language Education Opportunities and Functional Communication

A three-fold relationship is considered necessary among NGO operators and operations. The fallacy of thinking that operations will go on smoothly because those who speak some of the different languages needed are present in the various organizations will begin to affect NGOs adversely. There is the need to address the problem in the area of with responses received particularly in line language training and mass literacy programs which are not given emphasis at all by NGO collaborators.

Table 1: Responses on language needs

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Pidgin</i>	<i>Local Languages</i>
Senior staff	42 (93%)	31 (69%)	34 (76%)	37 (82%)
Junior staff	40 (100%)	8 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 2: Identified NGO training needs

<i>Training Needs</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Language Training	74	87
Mass Literacy	71	84
Communication	33	39
Report Writing	32	38

other languages given the locality in which the

Language Education Opportunities

In designing these programs, it must be borne in mind that:

- 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 training programs should be done either at NGO sites or in designated language centers where flexibility of time is the watchword and learners could be granted day release or block release opportunities.

- The language training programs must precede workshops being organized on communication skills since language skills and communication skills are not the same. As already discussed, communication skills cannot be used to replace language skills. They complement acceptable language skills.
- There should be language specialists who are not necessarily 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 must be different from communication arts specialists whose tasks, in these NGOs center round the development of Information, Education and Communication materials.
- 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 language needed should be taught within the context of NGO operations for it to be meaningful and relevant to their needs. This implies that language-related programs have to be drawn up for them.

LITERACY

NGOs in their bid to inform, educate and communicate with communities, the majority of which are rural, on the one hand have to be sensitive to the high illiteracy level of the Nigerian populace including some of those in their employ. Onibokun (1996: 9) states that in terms of functional literacy, less than 60% of the adult population can read and write in any language. If this is the situation, then more attention should be placed on literacy. 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 means of reaching the illiterate such as drama, music, jingles, pictures and signs do not at the end of the day replace the advantages of being literate one of which is the availability of the material and access to its content, even if forgetting has taken place. The quality of literacy provided will determine response to post-literacy activities.

On the other hand, post literacy development activities like language education opportunities should be functional so as to be meaningful to the learner. If adequate emphasis is placed on training, there must be a definite program to combat illiteracy and semi-illiteracy not as ends in themselves but as a means of preparing the NGO staff to be more effective.

FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION

Without adequate emphasis on post literacy and language education opportunities for NGO workers on the one hand, and literacy development opportunities for communities on the other hand, there can never be functional communication among the various NGO collaborators. The needs of the various categories must be met in order to promote understanding.

Daniel and Daniel (1992) state that acquisition of literacy and job training must affect local and world communities to be meaningful. Herein lies the inter-relationship between literacy and language related opportunities on the one hand and functional communication and wider international relations on the other hand.

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