

Learning from Experience: Developing an ICT Based Communication Strategy for sustaining the MDGs in Nigeria

Ejuma R Akpa
National Bureau of Statistics
Plot 762 Independence Avenue,
Central Business District, Abuja
+2348139102769
ejumaakpa@gmail.com

Kayode Olaniyan
National Bureau of Statistics
Plot 721 Independence Avenue,
Central Business District, Abuja
+2348038499670
kolaniyan@nigerianstat.gov.ng

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the communication strategy employed towards the attainment of the MDGs in Nigeria and how much impact has been achieved. It also identifies ICT through e-governance as the missing link in the development of an effective tool for communicating the MDGs. It highlights areas that can lead to effectively bridging the communication gap between all stakeholders involved, the benefits of applying the proposed strategy as well as limitations and challenges that will be faced.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.1 [Computer Applications]: Administrative Data Processing-Government

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

E- Governance; Information and Communication Technology; Millennium Development Goals

1. INTRODUCTION

In Africa, the major problems faced by over 40 per cent of the population relates to poverty. The focus thus, is the alleviation of poverty through strategies that should effectively improve the standards of living of respective countries. In 2000, the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was formed and with it, visions and targets of what the world and especially under developed and developing nations should aspire towards. Nigeria, being one of the countries that signed the Millennium Declaration for MDG is pushing hard towards the achievement of the 8 goals.

As with any set of goals, there are constraints, most of which are common across different countries. However, one of the constraints to achieving the MDG in Nigeria is inadequate communication to all parties and beneficiaries. How much has been done as far as communicating and connecting the MDGs, ideas, plans targets and goals to the Nigerian people? Do the outcomes connect across all stakeholders as being results of MDGs programmes? Are the outcomes in line with the people's need and are these needs communicated from citizens to

government? For the most part, there's still the notion that public policies are designed without the interest of the public. This thought can perhaps be attributed to the inadequacy of government communication to the public and the public's seemingly "voiceless" participation in the developmental plans that are meant to be beneficial to them.

The realization of MDGs involves policy formulation and implementation in various sectors. Thus a successful achievement of the MDG is built on effective communication between all stakeholders involved in the process.

This paper attempts to look at communication strategies employed by the government so far towards the achievement of the MDG. It will identify the minimal use of ICT as a gap and highlight how this communication can be improved. The methodology employs the use of secondary sources of data and is based on a review of the existing communication strategy as set by the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on MDGs. This review is outlined in Section 3. Section 4 identifies e-governance as a useful tool for communication of MDGs across all stakeholders while Section 5 proposes an effective ICT strategy to improve communication of MDGs between all layers of stakeholders. Section 7 highlights possible challenges to achieving the desired result, while the conclusions come in Section 8

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In any group, it is impossible to come to any reasonable decision if all the members are not headed in the same direction. Having a common mission, vision and value is pertinent to achieving any organizational goal [3]. The problem arises where this goal is to be dispersed among a wider range of people spread across various sectors, regions and layers of society. Therein lies the essence of communication to achieving any goal. Communication in all its different forms is essential to development of an organization, as it goes beyond just providing information but extending to building awareness, facilitating dialogue and ensuring a thorough understanding of set objectives. [4]. When a goal is set, all parties involved would have to reach an agreement on how they intend to achieve that goal. This can only be realized by building a communication strategy whereby goals, targets, policies, strategies and outcomes are clearly mapped out. Regardless of the type of organization, communication is the element that maintains and sustains all relationships and is central to the organizations success as it serves to inform, regulate, integrate, manage and persuade all actors involved [6].

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Table 1: Performance tracking of MDG indicators

	Base (1990 or earliest data point)	MDGs 2012	2015 Target
Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger			
Prevalence of underweight children under five years of age	35.70%	27.40%	17.85%
Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education			
Percentage of pupils starting grade 1 who reach final grade	67.00%	96.40%	100%
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women			
Ratio of girls to boys in secondary		102:100	100:100
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality			
Under 5 mortality ratio (per 1,000 live births)	191	94	64
Goal 5: Improve maternal health			
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	1,000	350	250
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases			
Percentage of population 15-24 years with comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS	18.30%	31.50%	100%
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability			
Percentage of population using improved drinking water source, urban and rural (de jure population)	54%	57%	77%

There are several communication tools that can be used to effectively deploy information, and receive response in order to ensure that activities, outcomes and strategies are adequately communicated within an organization. An effective communication strategy will encompass a combination of the internet, print media, public broadcasts and videos. The nature of the message to be propagated, the audience and to what extent the information is to be distributed is an important factor in determining the kind of tool to be used.

The UN MDGs can be compared to organizational goals in that there are certain basic and underlying principles that are common. As with every organization there has to be a clear definition of goals by which, targets and indicators and outcomes can be identified. These goals must be measurable with a set focus path and followed judiciously using a framework that is built to act as a guide to the achievement of that goal. The UN MDG is made up of 8 goals with indicators and outcomes that are measurable.

Although not a panacea for all development problems, ICTs serving as powerful tools that can, when used appropriately as part of an overall development strategy play a key role in the development process [2]. It can be used in virtually every area of human endeavor. Its multi functionality, rapid growth and spread make it accessible to a greater number of people. This access can be harnessed to meet the targets of the MDG especially with respect to ensuring effective communication of all aspects of MDGs. The use of ICTs can promote and facilitate community-based decision making (governance) by either reducing or eliminating social, economic and geographical barriers to effective community-based interaction communication and access to information [1].

3. REVIEW OF EXISTING COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

In order to achieve the MDGs, a cross communication between all stakeholders and beneficiaries is necessary. Only through communication can the government identify the needs and priorities of the people, assess the level of impact they have achieved in their targets, and also inspire the public's confidence in the government to deliver on their vision. The beneficiaries are the Nigerians who form the stakeholders, from the government itself, to non-state organizations looking to be involved in the process, to the unemployed, employed, educated and uneducated, young and old, rich and poor that makes up the country's citizenry.

When, the Office of the Senior Special Adviser to the President on MDG, (OSSAP MDGs) was formed in 2005, it had the mandate to: [8]

- i. Put in place a consultative process to identify key strategic areas likely to have the greatest impact on achieving the MDGs;
- ii. Design a coherent approach to achieving the MDGs, particularly using the debt-relief gains;
- iii. Integrate the MDGs into planning;
- iv. Provide quarterly reports to the Presidential Committee on MDGs;
- v. Develop a matching grant mechanism to support States in achieving the MDGs;
- vi. Assess and monitor the progress of implementing the MDGs in Nigeria.

There was not much as to developing a robust communication strategy linking all Ministries Departments and Agencies, States and other stakeholders involved. Communication basically involved the production of an information kit that described the debt relief and how it relates to the MDGs. It became a bit more significant in 2006, with the establishment of the National Youth Service Corp MDGs, the use of jungles, handbills and commercials that explained various aspects of the goal and MDGs Mid-Point and Full reports released in 2007 and 2010.

Since the start of the MDG, government agencies have tried to align their goals and strategies to meet with those of the MDGs. To that effect, all MDAs are expected to give reports of their performance indicators and how it keys into economic growth and its connection with the MDGs. With the use of websites and portals and through media and press briefing.

While the idea and tools used are good, it can easily be seen that the methods used, constitute a one way movement in communication, there is no real interaction between government

and citizens, as such no robust means of engaging the public in the processes. Even in terms of providing information, the methods used are not adequate enough to the MDGs on a continuous, sustainable basis. One of the missing links to this communication strategy is the inclusion of ICT. Since Nigeria has already adopted e-governance, the propagation and communication of the MDGs can effectively leverage on this platform.

4. E-GOVERNANCE AND THE MDGs

E-Governance is a term that is used to describe the use of ICT in governance. It has been argued that ICT is a significant driver of development especially in developing institutional frameworks, to promote social justice, support economic activities for the poor and providing access to international markets. [7] Across the globe, E-Governance is deployed to ensure efficiency, simplicity, better coordination, ease of access, wider coverage of government activities to the public and public participation in government activities. When applied it has been proven to lead to transparency, accountability and a better delivery of service. It encompasses two broad and interwoven areas, E government and E participation.

4.1 E-Government

E-Government can be defined as the use of Information Communication and Technology by government in its service delivery. The rationale behind the concept of e-government is the need to improve government administration and management, speed up government processes, communication and interaction with citizens as a means of ensuring transparency in the governing process, effective coordination among government institutions and indeed better service delivery. In Nigeria, e-government has evolved from a mere web presence to being used as a tool for ensuring fast paced service delivery. It is estimated that about 30% of government services are delivered online with 420 MDAs having effective websites and portals. [1]

4.2 E-Participation

E-participation, simply put is the use of ICT in engaging large scale public participation in the processes leading up to development in a country. It depends largely on how much of an enabling environment the government has provided for citizen participation in development, especially in areas of policy decisions and reforms and project monitoring against targets. It also depends on citizen interest and demand for proper service delivery and accountability, as it generally affects their well-being. It can be used to foster effective cross communication of MDG, demand for better services, monitor government activities and overcome social barriers. Citizens are able to connect with their government on a more interactive platform in order that the common goal of the MDG is reached.

5. PROPOSED STRATEGY

The proposed communication strategy will adopt the Government –to –All (G2A) approach to communication and will consider all channels that can be applied to the MDG. Specifically, it is aimed at improving G2G and G2C modes of interaction between stakeholders. With the emergence and growth in usage of emails, internet, video conferencing, participatory GIS, mobile phones, SMS, blogging, RSS feeds, and other modes of interaction have been developed[9]. Thus, the proposed strategy takes advantage of the growth trends in three e-government applications; Mobile communications, IT infrastructure and Social networks and the

growing population of internet savvy Nigerians. The population of Nigerians with access to internet is rising steadily, currently it is estimated at 32.40% from 29% in 2011 and is expected to rise to 41.62% by 2015 [1]. That being the case, the internet can be a very important tool for communication between all stakeholders in the MDG, since this growth reflects a cross section of the population.

5.1 Improving G2G Communication through ICT Infrastructure

The government's investment in IT infrastructure should be seen as action with an expected outcome. Nigeria has identified the need to improve ICT presence. While there are structures on ground, improvement should take the form of developing robust network links across all tiers of government as well as building a joint ICT structure between Federal and States government, Ministries Departments and Agencies in the form of centralized database, provision of intranet, internet and primary domains as an effective way of maintaining communication by government within its MDAs. This will greatly improve inter and intra MDA exchange of data on specific MDG targets while ensuring that there are no duplication of roles and confusion that may arise as a result of lack of communication within government. These networks can also be used as means of monitoring MDA projects, while minimizing cost, reduce time spent and ensure better management of resources. Also, the provision of ICT centers and hubs in communities and wards especially rural areas where most of the beneficiaries of the MDGs will be concentrated will go a long way in ensuring that the voice of the community is heard through the use of video conferencing.

5.2 Improving G2C Communication through the use of Social Media

In January 2012, the government realized the extent social media can go as far as mass mobilization is concerned, with the *Occupy Nigeria Movement* that paralyzed economic activity for 2 weeks. Using social media as a means of propagating their agenda, protesters were able to take the public by surprise, expressing the public dissatisfaction at what was thought to be unpopular public policies. It was a wakeup call for the government because it was realized that the citizens were indeed interested in their affairs and demanded fairness and better service delivery. Public authorities can learn from the methods adopted by civil rights groups, by implementing social media accounts and blogs to communicate all goals, strategies and the expected outcomes at regular intervals. All MDAs can take advantage of the population actively engaged in social media such as Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn. Having Facebook and Twitter accounts, setting up chat rooms and blogs, can provide a platform for exchange of information, ideas, obtaining constructive feedback from other stakeholders and a tool for garnering large scale support from the population towards the achievement of the MDGs.

5.3 Improving G2C Communication using Mobile Technology

Since its inception in Nigeria at the turn of the century, mobile communication has grown rapidly. Now, there is an estimated population of 117 million mobile phone users, making Nigeria, the 2nd largest mobile phone market in sub-Saharan Africa. It is evident that mobile phone usage cuts across all levels, rich, poor, unemployed, employed, and students, rural and urban population. With this level of mobile phone usage, some sectors have taken advantage of this growth path for the development of mobile

content and application. Today, mobile money transactions such as mobile banking and mobile shopping exist with about 3000 agents. Public authorities and MDGs advocates can take advantage of the availability of such innovations in mobile technology to propagate the MDG across the large population of mobile phone users, by employing simple Short Messaging System, the internet and social networks applications. Mobile telecommunication is a very promising avenue for relaying the message of the MDGs, updating and mobilizing citizens as well as gathering public opinion thus minimizing opportunities for corruption, mobilizing support for development programmes, creating awareness for policy formulation, ensuring preparedness and readiness for coming projects, identifying expectations and soliciting feedback for further improvement.

6. EXPECTED BENEFITS

The benefits of using this strategy are limitless. One obvious benefit is that, it will lead to a relatively transparent governing process whereby every stakeholder in the MDGs is involved. This will minimize the possibility of corruption and increase the demand for good governance. It will go a long way in inspiring public confidence as well as building interest of the public in the MDGs in order to encourage citizen participation. Since there will be regular interaction between citizens and government and the flow of communication will be continuous, citizens are aware and involved in the developmental processes. Moreover, the fact that citizens can easily identify where the government is failing or scoring will increase demand for accountability and transparency from government. [5].

7. LIMITATIONS

Despite obvious acceptance and readiness by both the government and citizens to achieve the MDGs, there are still some challenges, Most of which are however common to developing nations. First, access to ICT infrastructure is a limiting factor. As much as this number is increasing, there is still a quite a significant number who do not have access to computers, let alone the internet. Computers and mobile devices are still expensive commodities for some Nigerians.

Nigeria has one of the lowest internet access speeds due to challenges in broadband access, mostly as a result of cost. The cost of broadband subscription is still relatively high.

Since the strategy being proposed makes use of technology and technology is majorly powered by electricity, the state of electricity supply in Nigeria, poses a threat to improvement in communication through ICT, and is generally a major challenge to development. Electricity supply is still not even across the nation and there still exist areas where it is relatively unavailable.

8. CONCLUSION

To achieve the MDG, it is necessary to build a communication strategy that is inclusive of all stakeholders, because the benefits

are considerable. While we know that communication is pertinent to the achievement of goals and ICT is a strong tool for interaction across stakeholders, we cannot claim that the strategies posed above would absolutely ensure that the MDGs are met by 2015, however they would go a long way to ensuring that all parties are aware of the government's efforts at providing a better life for the citizens. In addition, it will provide a platform for citizen participation in the implementation of the MDGs. It is thus; recommended that policies surrounding ICT should be strengthened to ensure that communication through improved IT infrastructure, G2C communication using social networks and mobile technology can be sustained, even post MDGs. Also, increased funding in the provision of ICT infrastructure and the education of ICT in the country will also go a long way in improving communication between government and citizens.

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