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INFORMATION SHOULD SERVE SOCIO-ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

BY

Michel A. Santos
Information Officer
ECA

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Information should play a key role in the economic development effort. Its aims should be to enable men and women to understand and define their problems and to help them to solve these problems themselves. It should also help the various strata of society and in particular the rural population to change their life style by making them aware of the obstacles in the way of improving their standard of living.

In short, information should help people in the developing countries to participate and solve the social problems with which they are faced.

The trust of information in Africa vary from community to community and from social group to social group. Properly chosen and properly handled, information items can help individuals to improve their social and material circumstances and to adopt an approach conducive to economic development or to change their outlook, as the case may be. Information should not lose sight of the need to educate and should take account of those values which relate to the dignity of man and the relationship between man and society.

There is no doubt that information activities presuppose that the journalist has an understanding of those aspects of the social sciences which deal with the relationship between man and society: sociology, psychology and such other subjects as economics, law and public administration.

Were information to be confined to faithful accounts of social or political events, aircraft crashes and the other sensational happenings which hit the headlines, it would be failing in its obligations towards Africa. Of course the press must provide information and keep us up to date with the news, but it should also bear in mind the major consideration of improving standards of living and economic and social development.

Information can be effective in this regard in developing countries and in Africa in particular as long as the medium is adapted to the social group to which it is addressing itself. If it is not, an elite which expects something else from the radio, the television programmes or the newspaper may well get bored.

There are, for thousands of insects in the tropics which can be deadly, such as the mosquito. Those of us who went to school and learnt to read and write take the necessary precautions to prevent or cure malaria. But we represent at best 15 to 20 per cent of the total population of Africa and even this is an optimistic estimate. Eighty per cent or more of the population in rural areas live at subsistence level. They do not know that worms and germs can come from the earth and water, from flies, mosquitoes, fleas and other insects, from animals and people, not to mention food. Add to that the fact that they are poor and poor because they are ignorant. This is a vicious circle that information should help to break. It should play the part of the teacher that the village elder never knew. When used in this way, information can play a key part as long as it is adapted to the mentality of the environment.

To illustrate this fact, we could take some examples first from the agricultural sector in general and then from the life of a rural family.

Few are those who read magazines and newspapers, who listen to the radio or who watch television who have not come to realize that a great threat is hanging over the developing countries and that the danger is posed in terms of deprivation for millions of people. These are the millions who are living in the rural areas and are more or less content with their lot. They are not aware of this threat. They do not really understand the origins of the endemic diseases which poison their lives from day to day. They are resigned because they do not know how to overcome their underdevelopment.

True, some of them vaguely realize that it is not enough just to keep body and soul together notwithstanding malnutrition and unsatisfied needs. There are hundreds of millions of people with a valid contribution to make to production but they are grappling with a hopeless existence, which could lead to collective despair. Eighty per cent of the farmers in our countries and almost 50 per cent of the total population of the world make their living in a subsistence economy. A man, his wife and his children live almost exclusively on their own agricultural produce. They go hungry when the harvest is bad and rarely have the slightest surplus to exchange for money. Rooted in illiteracy and ignorance, theirs is a life where hope withers like autumn leaves and where the smallest ambition is quickly and easily nipped in the bud before it has a chance to bloom and before a gleam of hope emerges.

The reasons for man's plight in the rural areas are manifold and almost all relate to obstacles in the way of development. A few random examples are the traditional, not to say primitive, methods of cultivating the land, the absence of a local market, the lack of an all-weather road network, the lack of communications and, in a word, the total absence of any stimulus to promote economic development, without mentioning the sometimes highly iniquitous sanitary conditions. All these factors slowly but surely erode the human potential to be found in the rural areas. It is not enough to recognize all these obstacles and to decrie the situation. Those most directly concerned, who know nothing because they are illiterate, have to be made aware of them.

The African peasant is also unaware that wind erosion, or the daily battering of the wind against the soil, or the seasonal swirls of the trickling rain-water have a serious effect on the fertility of the land. It took the scourge of the drought in the Sudano-Sahelian zone to make some officials remember that the desert is constantly encroaching on 6,000 Kms of Africa South of the Sahara and that the farm land in that region is constantly being eaten away at the rate of 1.5 to 10 Km per year. Has enough care been taken to explain to the cowherd, the nomadic shepherd and the camel-driver that this systematic encroachment of the desert is to a large extent due to overgrazing of goats, camels and cattle as they are moved around according to the season? Here is an area where information could play a prime role now that little transistor radios can be found in the most out-of-the-way regions of the continent. When the peasant realizes that his lot is directly related to the extent to which he helps to conserve the soil which nourishes him, he will unquestionably make the necessary effort to correct these traditional habits which have serious implications for the survival of the community.

It is not inappropriate to mention some of these traditional practices which are having a gradual and irreversible adverse effect on the environment in tropical areas. Such practices drive the population of these areas into underdevelopment.

There is, for example, the case of bush fires. Almost throughout the tropics and sub-tropics, vast forest which could have yielded valuable timber, good wooden beams and wood for furniture have been damaged and often destroyed by bush fires. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that over 200 million peasants in tropical areas follow this practice. They set fire to the bush, thus burning the young shoots and shrubs and using the ashes for fertilizer for extensive farming. The peasant can scratch a living for one or two years from what he produces in this way. Once the land under crop is exhausted, the family moves on, chooses another piece of bush, sets fire to it and begins again. Meanwhile, the forest has been destroyed; the top soil has been eroded. This is how 100 million hectares of tropical Africa south of the Sahara have been destroyed by bush fires and traditional farming methods.

Clearly, as was stated at the outset, there is the risk of preaching to the converted since African journalists are to a lesser or greater extent informed about this kind of problem. What matters is to educate the rural masses. We therefore hope that our fellow journalists who use audio-visual techniques to impart information to the people in their countries will remember some of the important problems facing rural communities, since such problems put a stop to or at least represent forceful constraints to development.

The compound effect of a series of minor factors in the long run spells disaster. The profit a farmer could derive from good harvest is often wiped out because he has neither competent co-workers nor means of transport or adequate storage facilities. Thus for example, the extreme humidity in the tropics and the lack of technical knowledge to preserve crops cause tremendous losses.

The losses suffered in Africa after crops are harvested are estimated at some 30 per cent. These losses are due to a combination of several minor factors : birds which peck the grain in the fields ; holes in the sack of grain as it is being transported from the farm to the market causing the content to pour out in a stream the whole way. There are also old sacks which burst under pressure when they are too full.

The real enemies of the peasant who systematically destroy crops are the armies of little insects of all kinds, the beetles whose effort to destroy the crops are facilitated by the tropical humidity, dust and a host of micro-organisms. It is the duty of information to help the peasants to recognize these scourges and to work hand in hand with experts in order to find solutions to these problems.

Across an entire belt of Africa south of the Sahara, which accounts for one fifth of the continent, a little bird called the quelea-quelea has the power of life or death over millions of farmers. In East Africa, more than one famine has been caused by the little quelea quelea. In Senegal, 90 million of these birds flying from their nests in the surrounding areas ate 9,000 tons of agricultural produce in the space of one month. Nigeria estimated that one year, in just one region of the country, the loss might be valued at over 3 million US dollars. It was perhaps an exceptional case that year but it is a fact that over a period of five years the losses suffered by the 20 or so worst hit countries were estimated at US dollars 37 million.

There is no point in mentioning other factors such as the tsetse fly, which paralyzes cattle and weakens and kills peasants in the regions they infest, thus destroying human potential and economic resources.

We believe that information has a key role to play in stimulating the awareness of rural populations. It should tell them in a way that they can understand that their day-to-day existence is threatened by a series of dangers and that they must break away from an era of fatalist and resigned tradition which keeps them in the vicious circle of ignorance and under-development. Such an awareness might quickly give rise to a desire to participate in development efforts, to accept that account has to be taken of the elementary techniques which will help to improve irrigation, control erosion, improve storage techniques and modernize marketing systems at the level of the village, then of the region and ultimately of the nation as a whole. A journalist who publishes a series of articles or makes a series of broadcasts on how to protect the foodstuffs sold in the market against disease-carrying flies and micro-organisms can help to save as many lives as the doctor if he manages to convince his audience of the importance of hygiene measures to protect the rural population and to safeguard man's most valuable possession, his health.

One has to be in good health to have a good output, be it in agriculture, industry, administration or commerce. In Africa, endemic diseases are a sizeable obstacle to making the most of human capital. Such diseases are often the cause of infant mortality but they also carry off adults who make a valuable contribution to the development effort.

If no one tries to convince the peasant who is basically wary and, in addition, illiterate that mosquitoes lay many eggs a day and that the eggs are laid in swamps, puddles, old tins full of water, bottles of water that lie around outside houses, calabashes where rainwater is collected, pots used to keep water and so on, it is hard to persuade the illiterate peasant that water, which has always been a good friend both in the house and in the fields, can become a deadly enemy. It is also essential to help the peasant to understand that the eggs of the mosquito turn into larva and that the larva turn into mosquitoes which are carriers of death and that all these changes occur in the space of about two weeks.

Although the statistics reveal a high infant mortality rate and newspapers carry long articles developing this state of affairs, it is rare to find a column or two in African dailies about the main vaccinations. Radio broadcasts do not often explain to their listeners the advantages of vaccinations for children or adults. One has to conclude that the basic purpose of information has been forgotten in view of the importance to society of human resources and of the health of the child who will ensure the continuation of society and contribute to development.

Information in Africa should be directed towards scientific extension work. This could be carried out in conjunction with the village doctor and any other specialists who are prepared to make a contribution.

It is our duty to ask how many mothers in the village know that they should check that their children have received all the essential vaccinations. How many of them know that the BCG and smallpox vaccinations are given during the first few months of infancy? How many know that at two years children should be immunized against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough by means of an injection every month for three months and that in certain cases boosters have to be given? Who has taken the trouble to explain to these heartbroken mothers who lose one child after another that prevention is better than cure? Over 75 per cent of these poor mothers do not know that they can save their children from the ravages of measles or yellow fever by one simple injection.

This should be done once the child is two years old and then he is protected for at least one year in the case of measles and six in the case of yellow fever. The same is true for typhoid, although a booster is recommended after a year.

The role of information as support for the development effort should extend to every aspect of daily life. This should be the kind of information offered not only in the capitals and large cities but above all in the rural areas where one often has to start from scratch because a badly prepared vaccination campaign can launch a veritable rebellion.

Bearing in mind the remarks made about traditional farming methods and traditional eating habits as well, it can be seen that, without education for the masses, the people of the rural areas are condemned to a difficult and hazardous existence.

The major feature of the rural diet is its protein deficiency. This prejudices the physical and mental health of the peasant right from his childhood. Few mothers know that they have to have extra protein in their diet when they become pregnant and while they are nursing their children, that during the entire first year the baby or the child needs the equivalent of four times as much protein as the adult normally needs. Specialists know a thousand and one ways of making the diet protein rich but in some cases it entails changing most of the eating habits and information could play an important role in this field. When he grows up, a badly nourished child will not be up to the development effort physically or mentally.

In conclusion, information can play a key part in economic and social development because it can prepare the ground for the men and women of a given society to really understand the obstacles in the way of progress.

Many studies have been carried out by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the ECA is prepared to send out to those of our fellow journalists who are interested, all the documentation relating to the problems mentioned in this paper in order to help them make information serve development.