

Rethinking Sustainable Development through Communication: The Linguistic Implications of Vernacular Radio Stations Call-In Programmes

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Abstract

Global warming and climate change are issues that have occupied the world at large with nations grappling with finding solutions to stop the devastating effects. There is urgent need for countries especially in the developing world to find ways through which the masses can be educated on development of programs that would foster environmental sustainability. Presently in Kenya, FM radio stations, especially those broadcasting in vernacular languages are making a definite impact on civic education of the mass society and strengthening the development of more democratic cultures. They also provide a forum through which possibilities of reaching a wider population and educating them through a language they understand and have a sense of belonging to is achievable. If well harnessed, the FM technology would be the best avenue through which attitudes and habits towards sustainable environmental education can be developed. Vernacular radio stations take care of the social and cultural diversity and are adequately localized to cater for the broader and poorer layers the society. The focus of this paper is to rethink the policy the government through vernacular radio stations can adopt and redo the programs to embrace environmental sustainable development to combat the threats of climate change. It will also endeavor to recommend ways of developing policy to direct programs to educate listeners on environmental sustainable development. This is part of an on-going study on Linguistic Politeness and Gender Identity on Mulembe FM call-in shows.

Key words: Vernacular radio stations, Education, Environmental Sustainable

1. Introduction

The influx of vernacular FM radio stations in Kenya was based on economic reasons, a need to disseminate information to the rural population, gender mainstreaming in all aspects of life and political reasons. FM technology is a revolution in both rural and slum urban Kenya that has propelled vernacular radio stations to greater importance making English and Kiswahili stations take a peripheral role. Both Kiswahili and English radio stations mainly appeal to the elite and urbanites that for decades have used ignorance and foreign languages to lock out the bulk of the population from the mainstream socio-economic dispensation in Kenya (Cheruiyot, 2008). It is therefore no wonder that over 80% of Kenyans are neither competent nor eloquent in English and Kiswahili. Currently, FM radio and the internet are the twin pillars of the digital age and studies by UNESCO have shown that vernacular languages globally are the real tools of invention and discovery.

In Kenya there are over 60 FM radio stations offering broadcasts in vernacular languages (GoK, CCK, 2005). Vernacular radio stations enjoy overwhelming support from the 42 ethnic communities they serve since they have taken over the role lecturing the masses on diverse areas of concern. The rise of vernacular languages is not a curse to the nation but a trend in the right direction since indigenous languages should be embraced and given the right nobility they deserve. The 2009 Kenya census report asserts that 75% of Kenyans own radios and that the radio is the quickest and most affordable way of disseminating any

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information. The media including the radio in an information society has the dual role of informing the general public of policy, national development and current affairs especially those affecting them directly. It also has to give the public the ability to make their voice heard. The media is seen as a vital two-way tool providing information from the top to the masses at the grass roots and allowing their views, ideas and opinions to filter back to policy makers “Whoever controls the media controls the mind”.

Mulembe FM is owned by the Royal Media Services and it targets the Luhya audience which accounts for 5.6m people of the over 38million Kenyan citizens. The station is popular especially with the rural populace since it offers an access to entertainment and information on various issues. Though there are other stations that offer broadcasts in Luhya language, Mulembe FM stands out as the only exclusive 24 hour Luhya station. Call in shows is an integral part of their broadcasts since they offer a chance to the listeners to express their views and opinions in an interactive manner.

Agenda 21 (1991) United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio De Jenairo, Brazil Plan for Achieving Sustainable Development in the 21st Century Principle 10 states that– Participation of all concerned citizens, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment and the opportunity to participate in decision making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. This principle is important since it provides a direct link between sustainable development, media and democracy. Vernacular radio stations, including Mulembe FM are capable of being the conduits through which information can reach the people and have an impact on promoting practices that are sustainable.

In order to gain and maintain a sustainable audience, communication media must include recipients’ needs and expectations early on in message production – how far the mass media is able to take care of the recipients needs so much that the citizenry, through it become socially, economically and linguistically advanced.

Mazrui on a commentary on why African languages should be used:

“No country has ascended a first rank technologically and economically by excessive dependence on foreign languages. Japan rose to dazzling industrial heights by scientificating Japanese language and making it the medium of its own industrialization. Can Africa ever take off technologically if it remains so overwhelmingly dependent on European languages for discourse on advance learning? Can Africa look to the future if it is not adequately sensitive to the cultural past?”

Sustainable development strives to achieve economic development that can be maintained well into the future and for all human beings. The Brundtland Report describes the common challenges facing the earth namely: growing population, security, food security, threats to and conservation of species and ecosystems, energy use and depletion of energy sources, industrial development, increasing urbanization and relationship between poverty and environmental degradation.

The goal of sustainable development has been generally described as to achieve a sustainable society. This means a society in which economy and population size are managed in such a way that they do not do irreparable harm to the environment by overloading the planets ability to absorb waste and pollution, replenish its resources and sustain human and other forms of life over a specified period of time. In a sustainable society the needs of people are satisfied without depleting natural resources and thereby reducing the prospects of current and future generation of humans and other species.

- The objectives of sustainable development are:-
 - Reviving growth.
 - Changing quality of growth
 - Meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water and sanitation
 - Ensuring sustainable level of the population.
 - Conserving and enhancing the resource base.

- Re-orienting technology and managing risks.
- Merging environment and economics in decision making.

Education and Sustainable Development

The decade 2005 – 14 has been selected as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The aim is to:-Promote education as a basis for a more sustainable human society and Integrated Sustainable Development (ESD) or Education for Sustainable Living (ESL). Environmental education was first propounded at the Belgrade Chapter (UNESCO – UNEP 1976) with the goal of a world population aware and concerned about the environment and associated problems and which has the knowledge and skills, attitude, motivations and commitment to work individually and collectively towards solutions for current problems and prevention of new ones. Environmental prevention should

- Foster clear awareness and concern about economic, social, political and ecological interdependences in urban and rural areas.
- Provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment and skills needed to protect and improve the environment and.
- Create new patterns of behavior of individuals, groups and society towards the environment.

According to the Tbilisi Declaration UNESCO (1978), environmental education should focus on five criteria namely:-

- Awareness: to help social groups and individuals acquire an awareness and sensitivity to the total environmental and its allied problems.
- Knowledge: to help social groups and individuals gain a variety of experience in and acquire a basic understanding of the environment and its associated problems
- Attitude
- Skills
- Participation.

UNESCO 1998 (Thessalonica) focused on all issues of sustainable development, including economic, environmental, social and cultural aspects. Like environmental education ESD involves a multidisciplinary process that focuses on critical analysis of environmental issues by gathering information, organizing information and interpreting information to draw conclusions and make inferences. It has to foster respect for human needs compatible with sustainable use of resources and the need of the planet combined with a sense of global solidarity.

ESD is sensitive to gender, poverty, diversity, should include all factors of sustainable development including the environment, economy and society but explicit attention should be given to those groups in the society that are marginalized or otherwise disadvantaged such as the poor, women and children.

People should be presented with real world contexts and issues, global yet local specific, people are often encouraged to change when they are presented with examples from reality and from examples to which they can relate to and which they know do really exist – issues of sustainable development have local, national, regional as well as global implications.

The media plays a crucial role in educating and making individuals, communities and the society conscious about sustainable development, the need for more sustainable patterns of production and consumption and encouraging them to take action directed towards change and a more sustainable future. The common man is the most effective agent for change, once the civil society is familiar with the complex environment and development related issues, it will gain confidence to act appropriately leading towards sustainability.

Programmes for future implementation of agenda 21, article 37 states that education for all needs to be assured as another crucial factor associated with policy development. The mass media especially the radio are seen as the most cost effective way of providing information and a voice to all members of the society including the marginalized sections. The media has an important role in fostering debate, influencing public opinion and encouraging people to make changes towards sustainability.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to find out whether Mulembe FM broadcasts offer any programmes on environmental sustainability development and if they do, do the programmes have any impact on the audience in promoting practices that would ensure a sustainable environment for the future generation. Demonstrate the potential of radio broadcasting as a high efficiency / low cost means to meet development goals.

2. Theoretical Framework

The approach to language analysis in this study will be the Community of Practice (CofP) theory developed by Wenger (2000) and later adopted by Eckert and McConnel-Ginnet (1992) in relation to language and gender research. CofP is a move away from reliance on binary oppositions and global statements about the behavior of all men and women, to more nuanced and mitigated statements about certain groups of women or men in particular circumstances that negotiate between certain parameters of permissible or socially sanctioned behavior. A CofP has thus been defined by Eckert and McConnel-Ginnet (1992) as;

“An aggregate of people who come together around a mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing, ways of talking, beliefs, values and power-relations- in short, practices emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor.”

This definition suggests that the concept of a CofP is dynamic, rich and a complex one. It emphasizes the notion of practice as central to the understanding of why the concept offers something different to researchers than the traditional term community. The process of becoming a member of CofP involves learning just like apprenticeship does; we learn to perform appropriately in a CofP as befits our membership status which involves the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. The CofP focuses on what the members' do, the practice or activity that indicates that they belong to the group and the extent to which they belong. Broadcaster, listeners and call-in guest form a community of practice of Mulembe FM call-in shows. They belong to the group by virtue of their mutual engagement.

Wenger (1998) identifies three dimensions of a CofP as: mutual engagement, a joint negotiated enterprise and a shared repertoire of negotiable resources gathered over time. Mutual engagement entails regular interactions, when people who work together typically interact regularly, casually as they share jokes and intensively in small groups or comprehensively as a unit during meetings / interviews. This theory was adopted for this study because it influences people to change behavior as a group. For sustainable development to be achieved, there must be a behavior change.

3. Methodology

The study was based on the case study of Mulembe FM radio station call-in shows using content analysis research design to analyze discourse data. The study collected information on a wide range of themes, each to help identify recurrent themes on the call in shows. The research mainly concentrated on the audio taped discourse data from Mulembe FM call-in shows followed by scheduled interviews of listeners from Mumias District. Call-in programmes broadcast on Mulembe FM deal with different social issues on a day to day basis. From the call in shows, a checklist of issues on sustainable development was generated.

Mulembe FM radio station has an average of 15 hours per week of call –in programmes which run between 30 minutes to 1 hour averaging about 60 hours in a month. This study audio taped 20 hours of call-in programmes for one month (August 2010) which represented 33% of all the call in programmes for the

one month. There are 10 major markets with specified market days in Mumias district. The researcher randomly sampled 3 markets namely; Mumias, Shianda and Malaha. From each market, 30 respondents were interviewed.

Data Analysis

On the basis of the checklist and the interviews, it was possible to come up with a profile which is statistically almost justifiable and a representation of opinion on the perceptions of the listeners of Mulembe FM on sustainable development issues. The recurrent themes on the checklist were categorized and frequencies were run so as to get the percentages and make inferences. The interview schedule was open ended to allow the respondents to express themselves. The selected themes were categorized and coded to run frequencies and percentages.

4. Findings and Discussions

Demographic Characteristics

The socio-economic characteristics selected as variables for this study were age, gender and literacy level. Concerning gender, of the respondents, 50 were male representing 55.5% while the females were 40 representing 44.4% (Table 1). Of these, 42 men owned radios as compared to a paltry 6 women. The reason given to this discrepancy was that most of the women either listened to their husbands/brothers/family radios this can be attributed to the culture that designates property ownership to men therefore locking out women from accessing information thus delimiting them from the participating in issues of sustainable development and democratization.

Table 1: Gender of the respondents

| Gender | Number | Percentage |
|---------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Male | 50 | 55.5 |
| Female | 40 | 44.4 |
| Total | 90 | |

Age was also a factor in the perceptions of the respondents. Table 2 shows that most of the respondents fell in bracket of 15 to 40, n=58 representing 64.4%. This group is mainly made of the youths who are yet to reach leadership positions therefore do not have the privilege of decision making. Sustainable development especially of the environment cannot be achieved without involving the youth.

Table 2: Age

| Age | No. | Percentage |
|------------|------------|-------------------|
| 15-40 | 58 | 64.4 |
| Above 40 | 32 | 35.5 |

The other demographic factor that was taken into account was the literacy level of the respondents and it emerged that about 36% n=32 were illiterate and 36% had only basic education (Table 3). This therefore creates another drawback since it follows that with a high illiteracy rate, poverty is also high thus the needs of the people are basic and the environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty. Economic development alone cannot alleviate poverty unless the people are able to sustain a behavior change that goes with their understanding of the world around them which can only be achieved through exposure to knowledge in form of education.

Table 3: Literacy level

| Education level | No. | Percentage |
|------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Illiterate | 32 | 35.6 |
| Primary | 36 | 40 |
| Post Primary | 22 | 24.4 |

The respondents were asked whether in their opinion Mulembe FM had an impact in their lives. Without doubt, the majority answered in the affirmative. Most asserted that Mulembe FM was registering impact on social affairs, health issues, political awareness and democracy. The long term implication of this is however difficult to estimate though the impression one gets is that a very positive impact. In response to the question what sort of impact, the responses were varied but a few stood out:

- More people including the illiterate can access information unlike before.
- Radio plays a crucial role in educating the illiterate.
- Broadcasts in Luhya language make information from anywhere accessible in a language they understand.
- Listeners can contribute through the call in programmes.

The respondents were asked what issues Mulembe FM discusses frequently on its call in shows. Their responses are presented in table 4 below;

Table 4: Issues discussed on Mulembe FM call in Shows

| Issue | No. of people |
|--|----------------------|
| Human rights | 54 |
| Peace/ living in harmony | 75 |
| Security | 50 |
| Gender equality | 8 |
| Cultural diversity | 6 |
| Intercultural understanding | 68 |
| Health | 76 |
| HIV/AIDS | 82 |
| Market economy/ economic growth | 22 |
| Disaster prevention and mitigation | 7 |
| Climate change | 2 |
| Awareness natural resources in the environment | 18 |
| Rural development | 14 |
| Governance/democracy | 86 |
| Education to empower people | 82 |
| Ways of being, relating, believing and acting according to the context and history | 60 |
| Poverty reduction | 21 |

The above table summarized the three key areas of sustainable development covering the society, environment and the economy. From the above table, the findings reveal that the areas that are given weight are societal issues like governance, education and health related issues including HIV/AIDS. Little attention is given to environmental and economic issues. With poverty reduction, climate change, disaster prevention and mitigation, awareness of natural resources and cultural diversity rating lowest, sustainable development remains a pipedream. The poor are concerned with food, shelter and security. Their condition pushes them to overexploit the natural resources and is adverse to changing their retrogressive ways so as to take care of the future generation. In a sustainable society the needs of people are satisfied without depleting natural resources and thereby reducing the prospects of current and future generation of humans and other species.

The respondents were also asked if Mulembe FM radio station has a specific programme on environmental management and conservation. The majority (96%) answered in the negative while a mere 4% were not sure. This implies that as much as there are several call-in shows on Mulembe FM, no attention is given to Environmental Sustainable Development.

To probe further, the researcher asked respondents if there is a program that deals with the following issues;

- Water and Sanitation e.g proper use of water sources.
- Pollution of water sources.
- Ploughing on slopes.
- Flooding and landslides.
- Exploitation of forests
- Alternative fuel sources.
- Disposal of waste(rubbish, sewage and industrial waste)
- Hygiene

The majority of the responses were in the negative though quite a number admitted that most of the issues were highlighted in news items and commercial adverts. This scenario points to the fact that though Mulembe FM has the ability to inculcate proper environmental practices to its listeners, little is done in terms of depth of content. In fact, the onus has been left to commercial companies hawking their wares.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the objective of the study, the following recommendations and conclusions were drawn.

- Although there are several programmes broadcast and published in the media that bring messages of sustainability to the population, the design knowing the target, it is important to define and understand the audience and to come up with appropriate strategies to reach the targets. Each and every audience has a different set of values, biases and conceptions and well as hopes and aspirations for the future.
- With a largely rural population, the media should pay more attention to rural problems, views and challenges and increase access to the media for the rural leaders and populations for example through the establishment
 - Using simple technology that can be understood
 - Making products short and to the point thus holding the attention of the audience and generating interest.
 - Scale: stressing the human angle by presenting humans as the culprits, victims as well as solvers of environmental problems.
 - Making more products in the local languages:-
 - There will always be people who do not understand the national languages they understand.
 - Radio programmes are the most effective medium of communication due to the wide coverage, affordability and the fact that it reaches illiterate people as well.

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