

# **A Systemic Approach to Information Management at the Grassroots**

**by E. O. Soola\***

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses a systemic approach to development information management at the grassroots. It proceeds by defining the term "systemic" and by re-defining and/or reconceptualizing "grassroots" as a development concept. A systemic approach to information management at the grassroots must address not only rural areas but also urban peripheries. For effective grassroots information management, there must be a shift in focus from end-users to decision-makers. Horizontal communication channels must be harnessed to sensitize and activate all sectors of society for participatory decision-making at the grassroots.

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# **Une Approche Systémique pour la Gestion de L'Information au Niveau de la Base**

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## **Résumé**

Selon l'auteur, une approche systémique de la gestion d'information au niveau de la base doit examiner non seulement les régions rurales mais aussi les périphéries urbaines. Pour arriver à une gestion d'information efficace au niveau de la base, l'auteur trouve qu'il est nécessaire d'envisager un retournement dans le centre d'intérêt des bénéficiaires aux décideurs.

L'auteur suggère, en conclusion, que des voies horizontales de communication soient exploitées pour sensibiliser et activer tous les secteurs de la société pour une prise de décision participative au niveau de base.



## Introduction

A systemic approach to development information management at the grassroots must be predicated on a definition of 'systemic' on the one hand, and a re-definition and/or re-conceptualization of 'grassroots', on the other. The term systemic, in this context, is defined as a group of interlinking, interdependent and, consequently, synergistic elements. Applied to information management, it implies the methodology and principles of planning, designing and disseminating, or better still, sharing knowledge, ideas, opinions, values, feelings, fears and aspirations of a people, presented in a packaged and holistic form.

Grassroots, on the other hand, is a development concept often used in delineating the rural milieu. But thus used, the term is at best restrictive. This is because the indices for categorizing grassroots as rural – poverty, illiteracy, disease, ignorance, substandard housing, unwholesome environment, etc. – are also prevalent among urban slumites or peripherites. Indeed, the problem of the urban slumite is accentuated by varying degrees of unemployment and underemployment, malnourishment and undernourishment, crowded housing facilities, poor social amenities, unsanitary environment, etc. In addition, the urban slumite is a victim of unfulfillable expectations and consequent frustration. Thus poor and neglected, the urban slums provide a fertile breeding ground for layabouts, criminals and the ne'er-do-wells who wreak havoc on the larger society. The urban peripherites are thus worse off than their rural counterparts whose behaviours are moderated by kinship, clan, cultural and religious norms and mores.

While a systemic approach to development information management at the grassroots must address information management in rural areas, it must, in addition, take due cognizance of the plight of the equally marginalized urban slumites. The two milieux share a lot in common, though they are by no means identical. Since, in the opinion of this paper, information management is aimed at the attainment and sustenance of accelerated development, we shall adopt a two-pronged approach to the subject matter. First, we shall focus on systemic information management in rural areas.

Research, according to Chi (1987), has charted a direction for information management for rural development: how to effectively communicate with the rural poor; how to teach or empower the ruralite with the necessary skills; how to teach them to protect their environment; how to train them to increase their productivity; how to demonstrate to them feasible ways of marketing their produce; and



how to provide them with general information about the macro world system. The direction of this flow is, in the thinking of this paper, incontestably one-way, vertical, top-down, from the "knowledgeable" to the "ignorant"; it is a superior-subordinate flow, rather than a sharing process. The focus of the flow is the end-users (Chu, 1987; Nkala, 1990).

However, we feel strongly that information management focus at the grassroots must shift from end-users to decision-makers and the decision-making process. As Chu (1987) has noted, often times, though erroneously, the decision-making process is taken for granted. Indeed, an infallibility status is often ascribed to decision-makers. Thus attention has often focused on how communication can best be used for policy decision implementation, rather than for effective policy decision-making. Cees Hamelink (1983) has stressed the crucial need in any development process to have horizontal information channels which are deployed to activate all sectors of the population and thus facilitate access to decision-making for those otherwise excluded from the mainstream of decision-making. Usually, little consideration is given to the need, first and foremost, to feed the decision-making process with appropriate information to forestall wrong decision-making. Communication must be seen as an instrument of implementation and decision-making itself; it concerns itself with how information management can sensitize and empower the grassroots to contribute to meaningful decision-making at the grassroots level. Both the so-called professional decision-makers and people at the grassroots must actively contribute to decision-making aimed at developing the grassroots.

Chu (1987) has identified the systemic constraints to grassroots contribution to, and participation in, decision-making. These constraints are traceable to, among other variables, the individual effects or individual-blame approach to communication research and information dissemination. The individual-blame approach is rooted in the overt attraction of quantitative, data-generating, hypotheses-testing communication research with all its temptations to sacrifice accuracy for precision. The individual effects approach is itself a concomitant outgrowth of the use of "psychological attributes and behavioural indicators" in communication research and in explaining communication phenomena, all of which ignore the practical reality of communication as an interactive process, a process that is anchored to the collectivity of interpersonal networks rather than individualism.

Our searchlight for a systemic approach to information management at the grassroots must necessarily be turned in the direction of

institutional structures. An institution is here defined as a composite of networks of relationships among individuals. Roy (1989) has noted that interpersonal structures – formal and informal – have remained the grist of human socialization for centuries.

Since systemic development information management at the grassroots must be socio-culturally and functionally relevant, the need to contextualize information flow can hardly be overstressed. Scholars have underscored the mediating influences of socio-cultural structures through what Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) have described as system effects, or the influences of a system's social structure on the behaviour of the individual members of the social system. In the same vein, Katz (1961) stated:

It is unthinkable to study diffusion without some knowledge of the social structure in which potential adopters are located as it is to study blood circulation without adequate knowledge of the veins and the arteries (p. 70).

He submitted that a new idea (innovation/information)

... can be traced as it spreads through a social system, just as a radioactive tracer is followed by scientists as it courses through the blood stream (Katz, 1961).

More recently, Nkala (1990) has cited Babangida's integrated rural development, he suggested that

... in deriving such strategies, I hope that you will pay immense attention to existing territorial organisations of communities with which rural producers are familiar, with a view to transforming such organisational structures into viable and conductive systems for mobilising and directing developmental efforts of the grassroots (p. 56).

The above discussion emphasizes the futility of ignoring the social structures within which information is to be disseminated. It is a relief, however, that traditional African societies possess intrinsic social structures which serve as channels for effective information dissemination at the grassroots. Because of this relative freedom that often characterizes the governance of such organizations, they serve not only as channels of information transmission but also of dialoguing and information sharing. Ugboajah has observed that as soon as communication reaches the traditional authority – a king, a chief or a Council of Elders – the formal media cease to be significant, as communication from that point on assumes a diffusion pattern which



he describes as

... the informal or traditional diffusion network of lower chiefs, age groups, the market place market women organisations, traditional priests, staff heads, village teachers and the indomitable village crier or gongman (Ugboajah, 1982-83).

## **Media Choice and Use of the Marginalized Urban Slumites**

A systemic approach to information management at the grassroots cannot ignore the issue of media choice. Nwosu (1990), for example, has succinctly detailed, in an historical and perspectival form, the criteria for media choice and use for rural development. It is an axiom that the mass reach and simultaneity of the mass media, particularly of the radio, have remained unparalleled by any other medium and therefore it remains the most potent means of information transmission to a far-flung rural population. However, for the goal of attitude change, and considering the traditional structures of the grassroots, the use of traditional channels of information dissemination would appear more feasible than the mass media.

The composite nature of traditional social structures helps to explicate the various traditional forms. Nwosu (1990) has cited Ugboajah as defining traditional media as

... the products of the interplay between a traditional community's customs and conflicts, harmony and strife, cultural convergencies, culture-specific tangibles and intangibles, interpersonal relations, symbols and codes and oral traditions which include mythology, oral literature (poetry, story telling, proverbs), masquerades, witchcraft, rites, rituals, music, dance, drama, costumes and similar abstractions and artifacts which encompass a people's factual, symbolic and cosmological existence from birth to death, and even beyond death.

The bias for traditional media and interpersonal networks does not imply that the mass media are irrelevant in a systemic approach to development information management at the grassroots. The mass media will continue to be relevant, particularly if mass media operators will be prepared to minimize the mass media urban centricism and transmission syndrome and replace these with a culture-specific, situation-realistic and information-sharing approach to information dissemination. The mass media will need to be harnessed to bring home to would-be rural migrants the stark reality of city life. Such information may help to dissuade them from thinking too highly of the city. Of course, even in this task, a media mix approach that harnesses the possibilities of both the mass media and the traditional networks would be more desirable than a single medium approach.

Marginality has been described as a process in which the majority of a country's population is precluded from participating in the social, cultural, economic and political activities of their country. It is a living condition in which the urban peripherites lack basic services, are either unemployed or are underemployed and lack the education and/or skill needed to meaningfully participate in the political and production processes. They are thus marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of national development efforts.

A systemic information management for this sector will need to recognize the mass media as the principal channels of information dissemination. Apart from radio and television, which they either purchase or eavesdrop on, the urban slumites have access and are exposed to newspapers, the rising cost notwithstanding, through the new phenomenon of 'free newspaper reading' at the newstands. Of course, the friendship network is also very important, particularly because the lure of the city often comes from unrealistic pictures of the city as painted by both the mass media and friends from the cities. Such media use will need to be directed at helping the urban slumites to cope with the new situation in which they find themselves. This can be done through literacy and skills training. As for those who are already skilled, the mass media could be used to upgrade their skills, in addition to helping the urban slumites to identify available opportunities for their levels of education and training.

In this paper, a number of assumptions are made: that media content will be made relevant and qualitative; that the rural sector's input into media content will be solicited at the various programme planning and designing stages; and that decision-makers will have the benefit of listening to the grassroots as well as to educate and be educated by them. These conditions are essential for effective systemic development information management at the grassroots.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the concept of a systemic approach to development information management at the grassroots. It has attempted to redefine and reconceptualize grassroots to embrace not only the rural milieu but also the urban periphery. It identifies the individual effects or individual-blame approach to information dissemination as the bane of effective systemic development information management at the grassroots and suggests an institutional structural approach as a feasible alternative. Such an approach appropriately



situates development information management in the cultural, socio-structural and economic milieu of the beneficiary grassroots population.

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