

# Effective Communication and Attitudinal Change: An Appraisal of the Communicative Strategies on Covid-19 in Selected Communities of Kwara State

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effectiveness of the communication strategies of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on Covid 19 Pandemic in a selected communities in two Local Government Areas of Kwara State. Using multi-step flow theory and multi-dimensional communication approach as the yardsticks of the appraisal, five hundred respondents from five communities were randomly chosen as the subjects of the paper. This is aimed at determining their level of awareness of Covid 19 pandemic and compliance with the regulations and precautionary measures to prevent the spread or contracting it. At the end of the research, the paper discovers that (475) 95% of the respondents in the two Local Government Areas are aware of the pandemic, while (420) 88.42% of the respondents who were aware complied with the directives on precautionary measures to prevent its spread. The paper further discovers that the NCDC effectively used among other communication strategies above "Risk communication and community engagement strategy" which is in line with the yardsticks used in this paper to achieve this great feat. It therefore commends the NCDC for using effective communication strategies to reach the Nigerian populace thus controlling the spread of the pandemic. It also recommends adequate financial support for the centre and other change agents on the field to sustain the achievement so far made.

**Keywords:** Effective communication strategies; Covid-19; mass mobilization; attitudinal change.

## I. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Communication is an integral part of man. It is daily activities which start right from the time of waking up in the morning till the time one goes back to bed in the night. Even while in the bed

sleeping, one still communicates because the cessation of breathing is evidence of death. By it, people are organised and ruled. It is an indispensable activity in human society. According to McCroskey et al. (1971):

Man is a communicating animal. What we call "civilization" has been achieved by man through communication and is dependent on communication for its continuance. Our daily lives are filled with one communication experience after another. From the moment we arise in the morning till we go to sleep at night we are immersed in a sea of communication. Our very existence to say nothing of our happiness and professional success depends on communication.

The above shows how important communication is in the society. Although there are many definitions of communication as we have scholars, however, for the purpose of this paper two definitions are considered.

According to Udall and Udall (1979), communications is "The process by which a person (or a group) shares and imports information to another person (or group) so that both people clearly understand one another" (p.89). Eyre (1988) sees communication beyond the process of passing information, she emphasizes the need to understand and act on such a message. According to her "Communication is not just the giving of information and receiving and understanding the message. Communication is the transfer of a message to another party so that it can be understood and acted upon."

These definitions convey the essence of communicating which includes good understanding of the message and acting according to the intention or purpose of the source or sender of the message by the receiver. The proper reception of

the message, understanding of it and acting positively on it, thus making the reaction in tandem with the source's desire is effective communication.

According to Adeyemo (2008) "Effective communication occurs when the intended message sent by the source achieved its desired goal. Such message is described as having high fidelity". In achieving this, the source must ensure that the message is well packaged in such a way that the receiver will be able to understand it. This includes clarity of idea and purpose, simplicity, courtesy, right timing and channel, credible source and constant reinforcement of the message in form of emphasis. These among other factors will help the receiver not only to receive the message but to act on it.

Aleminu (2018) also posited that "once the intention behind communication is achieved, we say the communication is effective. Effective communication elicits the desired result(s) as expected by the initiator of such communication". In view of the foregoing, any communication that will achieve the desired goal must be effective in all its ramifications, that is why it is a sine qua non to achieving mass mobilization towards achieving goals on Covid 19 pandemic. The word "Sine qua non" according to Webster's Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus (2003) is a "Latin phrase that has been adopted into English and means essential condition, something that is absolutely necessary". It is necessary, requirement, pre-requisite need, must, pre-condition for something. Thus, we see how germane effective communication is to achieving goals especially mass mobilization for change.

Effective communication is a way of mass mobilization. The word "mass mobilization" is defined by Wikipedia as "a process that engages and motivates a wide range of partners and allies at national and local levels to raise awareness of and demand for a particular development objective through face-to-face dialogue". It is often used at the grassroot level using various channels such as interpersonal, opinion, religious and community leaders as agents.

Attitudinal change has to do with a change of one's belief or lifestyle. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1990) defines it as "a way of feeling or thinking about someone or something especially as it influences one's behaviour". In other words, it is a manner of thought, feeling and behaviour. A man's thinking many times determines his behaviour and to change a behaviour, one needs to deal with the attitude.

At this juncture, there is the need to examine Covid 19 pandemic in order to be able to situate this paper properly.

### **Covid 19 Pandemic**

Covid 19 is the short form of coronavirus disease which broke out in December 2019 in Wuhan China. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared it a global pandemic because of its rapid spread across the globe. By March 29, 2020 the number of affected people worldwide has reached 483,830,677 with more than 6.1 million deaths. The first record of Covid 19 in Nigeria was on 27th March, 2020, this happened in Lagos. As at June 25, 2022, according to NCDC platform, Nigeria has recorded 256,958 confirmed cases of Covid 19, 250,177 discharged and 3,144 deaths.

Coronavirus is a viral disease caused by coronavirus strain known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS – COV2). It causes common cold and more severe respiratory diseases with other attendant symptoms. It manifests within 2 – 14 days of exposure to the virus. Within a very short period of time, if the affected does not receive adequate medical attention, such may lose his or her life. The death rate is very common among the aged and others with underlying health challenges.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other medical personnel, there is no cure for Covid 19. Since it is a virus, it can be transmitted or contracted through any of the following: direct contact with the effected, contact with the affected respiratory droplets especially through sneezing or coughing, contact with mucosal surfaces (eye, nose or mouth). Also, the indirect way of contracting it is by having contact with the surface or objects which have been contaminated by the virus.

In order to prevent the spread of Covid 19, various measures have been put in place, these include personal hygiene such as washing of hands in flowing water regularly, use of face mask, maintaining social distancing, avoiding crowded gathering, shaking of hands and hugging. Above all, every adult is advised to get vaccinated against the virus.

The outbreak of Covid 19 affected virtually all the facets of human activities. The social, economic, political and religious lives of the world were almost brought to a halt. Many countries are still struggling to recover from the untold adverse effects of the virus. Nigeria is not left out of it. To prevent the spread and put an end to the losses of lives and other aspects of human

activities in the country, the Federal Government through the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) have put in place many measures including various communication strategies to achieve this.

#### **Misconceptions About Covid 19 Pandemic**

At the outbreak of Covid 19 pandemic, there were a lot of misconceptions, a misunderstanding of what it was all about. People did not believe that it was real. Some of the misconceptions include political means of getting free financial support or aid from the World Health Organisation (WHO); a means of reducing the population of the world; God's wrath against the world, and some believed that it was meant for only the rich and even above all, some did not believe that there was anything called Covid 19. This state of mind greatly affected the attitude of people to its spread. To worsen the situation, there was lockdown almost everywhere. Market, public, social and religious places were closed down. The people were forced to stay indoor so as to maintain social and physical distances from each other. When people started seeing hundreds of dead bodies buried every day and equally seeing people dying in Nigeria with frequent messages from NCDC, many started changing their beliefs and position.

As people started believing that Covid 19 exists and that it can spread, various curative traditional methods were introduced. Some of these included the taking of concoction, use of lime, garlic, onion, ginger. Some traditionalists equally advocated the need to appease the gods through sacrifices to stop the pandemic.

The various misconceptions therefore demand effective communication strategies which will change a non-believing and conforming citizen to the one that will not only accept the message but even be agent of change for the NCDC. This is the task that must be achieved by the NCDC if the spread of Covid 19 will be put under control.

#### **Purpose of this Paper**

The thrust of this paper therefore is to examine among other things the level of awareness of the respondents to information on covid 19, the attitude of the people to covid 19 and their compliance with the directives by the Nigeria Centre for Disease and Control. Above all the communication strategies adopted by the NCDC and its effectiveness will be examined while necessary recommendations will also be proffered.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Communication for social or attitudinal change and social mobilisation demands using varieties of approaches to create effectiveness. Nwuneli (1986) averred that use of accessible and other electronic and mass mediated channels are not enough to achieve attitudinal change. He then suggested that "interpersonal channels of communication such as face to face communication situations in meetings, clubs, festivals and informal gatherings must be initiated to compliment the modern mass media".

The above assertion is in line with the multi-step flow theory of communication which holds that "the mass media affects its audience members directly and immediately as well as indirectly from the opinion leaders". (Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008). The theory asserts that communication to a mass audience follows many steps to reach the grassroots. According to the theory, reaching the mass audience for a change should not be left in the mass mediated channels alone but other people who receive the information from the mass media and pass it to others. These include community leaders (the Obas and Chiefs), opinion and ward leaders, town criers, religious leaders etc.

Akin to the above is the multi-dimensional communication strategy which is "a comprehensive communications strategy that targets multiple relevant audiences through a variety of modes, platform and media content (<https://firstup.io/blog/4-key.com>). This strategy focuses on the use of every available means of communication to reach the audience with information or message that is meant to effect change in the lives of the audience.

The channels of communication to use include the internet, radio, television, bill board, newspapers, handbills etc. Others are non-traditional media such as interpersonal channels through dialogue, group, religious organisations, community heads, institutions of learning, painted vehicles, kiosks, use of vehicle for public announcement, town criers, celebrities as ambassadors of the message etc.

Closely related to the above multidimensional communication which is very relevant to this study is the health communication. According to Maibach and Parrot (1995) in Rim-Rukeh and Ogbemi (2007) "health communication is the use of communication techniques and technologies to positively influence individuals, populations, and organisations for the purpose of promoting human and environmental health". This type of communication, Rim-Rukeh and Ogbemi

averred that it “can contribute to all aspects of disease prevention and health promotion”.

Health communication therefore focuses on issues relating to the total well-being of an individual and community. It emphasizes among other things public health messages and campaigns, highlighting health risk information, prevention and how to have access to health education in all its ramifications. In this type of communication, multimedia and multidimensional communication come into the fore front. This is because only traditional media such as the radio, television, newspaper etc. can no longer be effective in the modern days of technological advancement in communication, increase in population with difficult in accessing these media because of the level of literacy, economy situation and the urgency that health communication demands in a state of pandemic like Covid 19.

In view of this, the combination of the traditional media with all other means of communication strategies which are considered to be effective must be put together to reach the audience for positive attitudinal change and that is what multi dimension approach entails. As the various media under the modern technologies (radio, television, digital, internet, newspaper etc.) are used in reaching out to the mass audience, it is imperative to introduce other more effective means such as interpersonal which include face to face, house to house, group, use of community, ward and religious leaders as encouraged by multistep flow approach to reach the mass audience.

Apart from using these means of communication to achieve the desired goals, it is very important to ensure that there is the reinforcement of the message through regular repetition of the information especially in a situation where one is expecting positive attitudinal change of habit or lifestyle which one has long been used to. As earlier mentioned, there are lots of

misconceptions about Covid 19 pandemic by the general populace. Therefore, every message on it which is to be sent to the masses must be well packaged with every simplicity and clarity using credible sources to reach the audience and make them believe, accept and promote the acceptance of the message by others.

Schram (1964) also emphasized the need to go beyond the traditional media if effective communication to achieve change will take place. According to him, “while radio, newspapers and films may pay a leading role in the process of accelerated modernization in the early stage, only patient face to face explanation and demonstration can provide effective channel of communication”.

It is, therefore, pertinent for any organisation that is introducing a message of change to a mass audience of heterogenous nature to be mindful of using every available means of communication to achieve the goal. This includes the integration of the mass media with other non-traditional channels to reach the audience. This is summed up in multi-dimensional and multi-steps flow approaches of communication strategies.

### **Survey on the effectiveness of the communication strategies of the Nigeria Centre for Disease and Control.**

A survey through questionnaire was carried out on five communities which were randomly chosen from Oyun/Offa LGAs of Kwara State. These communities are Ijagbo, Ipee, Igosun, Erin-ile and Offa. The communities share the same social status in terms of amenities. One hundred adult respondents were chosen from each community. The purpose is to examine their awareness of Covid 19 pandemic and compliance with the messages on the need to comply with the directives on preventing the spread of the virus. The following questions were asked with the responses stated below.

### **Are you aware of Covid 19 pandemic in Nigeria? Level of awareness of Covid 19**

<b>Communities</b>	<b>No of respondents</b>	<b>Aware</b>	<b>Not Aware</b>
Ijagbo	100	96(96%)	4
Igosun	100	93(93%)	7
Ipee	100	95(95%)	5
Erin-ile	100	94(94%)	6
Offa	100	97(97%)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>475 (95%)</b>	<b>25(5%)</b>

**Do you comply with the precautionary measures on Covid 19 pandemic in Nigeria?**

**Level of compliance with Covid 19 precautionary measures**

<b>Communities</b>	<b>Compliance</b>	<b>Non-compliance</b>
Ijagbo	86	10
Igosun	79	14
Ipee	79	16
Erin-Ile	85	9
Offa	91	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>420(88.42%)</b>	<b>55(11.58%)</b>

From the data above, it has been revealed that the information on Covid 19 pandemic has been very effective. The total number of respondents who were aware of Covid 19 and the level of commitment give credence to the communication strategies of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

**The Communication Strategies of NCDC on Covid 19 Pandemic.**

A look into the telegram platform of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control where publications and daily report on Covid 19 are placed, coupled with interview with health personnel in charge of Covid 19 in the two Local Government areas of study, it was discovered that the Centre engaged in “Risk communication and community Engagement strategy”. Risk communication refers to:

the real time exchange of information, advice and opinion between experts or officials and people who face a threat (hazard) to their survival, health or economic or social well-being. Its ultimate purpose is that everyone at risk is able to take informed decisions to mitigate the effects of the threat/hazard, such as disease outbreak and take protective and preventive measures. (IHR, 2009; WHO 2017).

In achieving the desired goals on Covid 19 pandemic using the above strategy, the NCDC has effectively used the following communication channels and strategies: the mass media, social media and internet, interpersonal and mobile communication through the use of megaphone in market places, villages, house to house, and regular daily press briefing to keep the populace abreast of the development on the pandemic were done.

The digital media has been effectively used and this has equally facilitated positive result. According to the NCDC report:

Messages are developed each week which reflect current realities and relate to the different phases of the outbreak response in Nigeria. Topics include: general prevention, rumour response and

government guidelines and restrictions in line with our “Take Responsibility” campaign. The communication team provides content for 3-5SMS that shared with each of the mobile network providers weekly to be disseminated to 1million per day (Airtel network), 20million per day (MTN network), 13million per day (gmobile network) and 9million per day (Glo network).

The foregoing corroborates the assertion of Agudoso (2007) on media effects on attitudinal change and how to effectively achieve this. According to him, “it is believed that people easily change their attitude to a particular product or idea on the basis of mass media content. For example, if such attitude is detrimental to health and can lead to premature death, people find it easy to change it”. However, where it is difficult to achieve attitudinal change, Agudoso (2007) further stated that “The realization of the difficulty in changing behaviour is quite informative for the professional communicators to heighten the effect towards giving repeated messages in a more persuasive way in order to effect proper behavioural change”. This is evident in the daily number of SMS messages sent to the populace on the pandemic.

Furthermore, the Community Engagement Strategy of the NCDC include among others the following:

Community buy-in which involves consultations with community members to create awareness. Finding out what the people know and how they feel about Covid 19 and the risks involved. This is survey. Another method is sensitization by health personnel in which people are made to know about the pandemic, and making them to be part of decision-making process on it. Dialogue was also used. This involved collaboration between the NCDC and the people in addressing the pandemic. Added to the above is the use of social mobilization in which various categories of people in the community are empowered to make decisions on Covid 19 and implement it.

Various groups of people in the community such as the community, ward, opinion

and religious leaders, town criers were used to reach the populace. To give credence to the source of the messages and the message itself through the mass and social media, celebrities were also used.

Justifying the use of Risk Communication and Community Engagement Strategy, the NCDC states that this is necessary “as misinforming the public may result in public outrage, lack of credibility of the government and cause more damage”. It further stated that “the socio-economic effects of social interactions like lockdown, if misunderstood by the public, may serve as disincentives to desired behaviour change. Effective RCCE helps to reduce anxiety and allay fears of the public with the expectations that the public will adopt responsible behaviour.”

## II. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it has been discovered that the NCDC has combined various communication strategies to reach various set of people in the country, no level of the populace is left out. The educated and affluence are reached through the various mass media while the average, poor and rural community dwellers are reached through the interpersonal and other communication strategies meant for such people. This has really contributed to the effectiveness of the communication on Covid 19 pandemic.

These strategies are in line with the communication approaches considered to be effective for attitudinal change for mass audience like the populace being reached with Covid 19 pandemic messages. These are the multi-dimensional and multi-step flow approaches which are used as yardsticks to determine the communication effectiveness on the pandemic.

The NCDC is, therefore, commended for this great feat which has been achieved. Limited people today are either ignorant of the pandemic or careless about the need to observe the precautionary measures against its spread.

## III. RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper therefore recommends adequate funding of the NCDC to be able to keep up the tempo of the communication effectiveness. Health personnel and ad hoc staff on the field who are carrying out the interpersonal communication in different forms should be promptly and adequately remunerated. As a result of high level of insecurity in the country today, adequate protection is necessary for those on the field.

The credibility of the message must always be upheld especially with regards to number of people infected on daily basis as some doubt the

authenticity of the number. Also, vaccine on Covid 19 should be sufficiently made available at different health centres as many find it difficult to get it based on the non-availability.

The NCDC should also continue to reinforce the already messages on the pandemic to create permanent effects on the populace. The centre should also have periodical assessment of the effectiveness of their strategies through feedback. Further studies should be carried out to ascertain the reasons for the non-compliance of some people on the Covid 19 pandemic directives.

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