

## **GLOBAL BLUEPRINTS FOR CHANGE**

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The Global Blueprints for Change contain guidance for working together to improve the capability to identify indicators of physical, social, enterprise, and environmental vulnerabilities throughout the world and to select and implement realistic solutions to reduce them towards acceptable levels.

### **THEME A: LIVING WITH NATURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISASTERS**

#### **Topic A.4: Enhancing Public Awareness**

**“Enhancing Public Awareness for Increasing Sustainability of Community in Sub-Saharan Africa”**

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**DISCLAIMER:** This manuscript was prepared as a contribution to the first edition of the Global Blueprints for Change and for use in conjunction with the International workshop on Disaster Reduction on 19-22 August 2001 in Reston, VA. This manuscript is “a work in Progress.” It has not been edited for policy and for conformity with the other Blueprints.

# ENHANCING PUBLIC AWARENESS FOR INCREASING SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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**Abstract:** This Blueprint for Change is written from the perspective and experience of Burkina Faso. The aim is to provide guidance for enhancing public awareness in communities throughout the world so that all sectors of their publics are able to contribute to a process that will, over time, make their communities sustainable.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>3</sup>

Public awareness may be defined as the process whereby a set of pertinent information is delivered to a group (family, neighborhood, community, region, society, nation) for the purpose of bringing about a specific response or change of actions in favor of the well being of the individuals or members that make up the group. Thus, in public awareness delivering the right information to the right people is as important as the reactions, which take place once the information is being delivered or provided.

For instance, in a malaria prone zone or a swamp, carrying out a public awareness program would consist of informing not only the people about the dangers of malaria, but also about letting them know what particular alternatives, if any, can be used toward protecting themselves against the disease (e.g., cleaning yards and buying a protecting nest). In this particular case, if indeed, the majority of the members that make up the group favorably reacts to the information provided by taking a set of actions, such as buying safety nests to protect themselves against the mosquito bites, then the public awareness exercise has reached to some extent its major goal. On the other hand, if the group remains indifferent or take some actions in such a way that malaria is being further aggravated among the group or community, then the public awareness has practically failed in meeting its goal.

In essence, public awareness is a two-step process that involves information delivery/sharing on the one hand followed by the favorable reaction or response on the other from the target group that is being presented with the information of interest. In other words, carrying out public awareness essentially entails getting involved into some set of *ACTIONS* (information delivery process) that would bring about the most favorable *REACTIONS OR CHANGES* for the good or well being of the group or community as a whole.

But what role can public awareness play in assuring a better community sustainability around the world and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular? In order to answer that, we

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need first to define what we really mean by community sustainability. Basically, community sustainability can be defined as the ability of local communities in pursuing and maintaining a sustainable development over a short, medium, and long term. In other words, a community is sustainable if it is capable of promoting a sustainable development, which consists of meeting all the current needs of the community members without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. This necessarily implies a development process that essentially aims at promoting a sound management of the natural resources that the community has at its disposal without degrading the environment, which supports them. Others consider sustainable development as a situation whereby economic prosperity is harmoniously balanced with preserved environment for future generations as well social equity and well being for all the community members (A. Hubbard, 1996).

In many parts of the world and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, the sustainability or capability of local communities to maintain acceptable standards of living (well being) over a long period of time appears so far very hampered, however. And the reasons for that stem from the fact that most communities are constantly being faced with various natural and environmental disaster problems, which continually prevent communities from engaging into the kind of actions that would foster a sustainable development over a long period of time. Such disasters or destabilizing agents in particular include: drought, climate change, CO<sub>2</sub> pollution, floods, pests, epidemic disease (AIDS, MALARIA, EBOLA FEVER, etc.), political instability and their corresponding consequences of desertification, massive crop failures, hunger, famine, malnutrition, infant mortality, wars, strife, massive population displacement and genocide killings.

In light of this situation, some concrete actions need to be taken in order to reduce the impact of these disaster agents and even reverse their on-going destabilizing trend, if indeed communities around the world and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular are to reach and maintain a truly sustainable development in the years to come.

Among such concrete actions, public awareness in particular appears to be one of the viable alternatives to consider. Indeed, many communities around the world are environmentally friendly and supportive for preserving their resource base for the future generations. They like their land and cherish their living environment. For instance more than 80% of populations in many African states continue to live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Nevertheless, more often than not those same communities by ignorance are prompted into taking some kind of actions that are quite incompatible with the sustainable development process over the long run. For example, actions such as carrying out abusive deforestation (tree cutting), bush fires, cultivation on marginal lands, drinking non-potable water and neglecting of basic sanitary conditions constitute just a few cases of inappropriate actions which are likely to negatively impact on the sustainability of communities in Africa and elsewhere in the long run.

It is well established, however, that in most cases, most local communities are quite willing to change their behavior or actions in favor of protecting their living environment from which depend almost entirely for their livelihood.

It is against this backdrop that enhancing public awareness is herein proposed as one of the most effective alternatives towards bringing about the required changes in behavior and actions in favor of improving the sustainability of local communities around the world and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular.

Specifically, this Blueprint will focus on the following:

- Major issues or threats to community sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa
- What can be done towards enhancing public awareness in sub-Saharan Africa?
- How can we go about enhancing public awareness?
- Specific issues/recommendations to be retained

## **MAJOR ISSUES OR THREATS TO COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

Major issues or challenges that currently constitute a major threat to the long-term sustainability of communities in Africa include:

**Major climate changes and related natural disasters:** Major climate changes and related natural disasters include: recurrent drought (Sahel region), floods (south African region) and pests (grasshoppers and caterpillars). Some specific actions therefore would be required in order to reduce the impact of these factors on the community sustainability. During 2000 and 2001, both flooding and drought have caused hundreds of thousands of families to lose their crops, houses, and animals. Countries that were most hard hit include Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa for the floods. Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and most of the Sahel were on the other hand severely affected by drought or prolonged dry spells during the growing season.

**Population growth:** In most African states, more than 80% of the population lives in rural areas. In addition, the fertility rate per woman remains very high throughout the continent. In most countries, there are at least 6 to seven children per adult woman in age of giving birth. On the whole, the population in Africa increases by 2.9 % every year, which is quite high compared to the developed nations. This situation altogether imposes a great pressure on the natural resource base, which is deteriorating much faster than Mother Nature can restore. Consequently, appropriate actions towards stabilizing the population in each country would be needed before too long.

**AIDS epidemic and other diseases:** AIDS epidemic and other diseases, such as malaria and “ebola” fever are also major threats to community sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, malaria-related deaths are estimated at 165 per 100,000 versus around 7 in the other regions. In addition, the AIDS epidemic is playing major havoc throughout

the continent. The situation already is so bad that it is projected to reduce life expectancy in the continent by up to 20 years (World Bank, 2001). In addition, considering that more people living with the HIV reside in rural areas, the epidemic is increasingly spreading to remotest villages, hence undermining agricultural production and threatening the sustainability of rural communities (FAO, 2001).

**Political instability:** Political instability leading to ethnic violence, strife, wars, and massive displacement of populations as well as genocide killings has significantly increased during the past several years. The particular cases in Rwanda, Burundi, RDC, CAR, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, etc... are quite memorable. In most of these cases, the resource base is so damaged that it may several decades before communities can regain their past level of sustainability. Because major political instability usually entails both economic and cultural impoverishment, it so far appears as one the worst threats possible to the community sustainability in parts of the Africa continent.

**Water pollution:** In rural areas, lack of toilet systems is causing many rivers, streams, and even wells from being polluted. In urban centers, lack of toilets, drainage, and proper waste disposal systems are causing serious pollution problems, especially in the sub-urban areas. As a result, various threats to human health are increasingly take over the cities and major rural areas. This consequently constitutes a major threat to community sustainability both in urban and rural areas.

**Air pollution:** Increasingly the air in major African cities is becoming polluted around the major metropolitan centers. This stems from the fact that in these centers the number of imports for used cars and engines has drastically jumped up several folds over the past few years. Unfortunately, there is no control as to whether these vehicles and machinery comply with environmental norms at the time of their imports. Consequently, these may constitute in the long run a serious threat to human health while contributing more CO<sub>2</sub> to increasing the green house effect and the global warming. Ultimately, this will become a major threat to the community sustainability in the long run both in urban and rural areas.

**Efficient use of resources:** The increasing population growth, especially in urban centers is generally accompanied by a relatively significant use of fossil fuels. These ultimately contribute in increasing the emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere although the performances of the machines are not necessarily efficient. This situation therefore needs to improve in the long run.

**Endangered species:** Various plant and animal species have already disappeared during the past 40 years in Africa. Others are likely to follow suite if nothing is done soon to reverse the trend. Ultimately the disappearance of too many living species could create problems for the natural habitats of the communities. For instance, the encroaching of the desert as well as apparition of some new diseases may be the result of this situation. Some concrete actions therefore would be needed before too long.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE TOWARDS ENHANCING PUBLIC AWARENESS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

**Climate changes and related natural disasters:** Climate changes along with natural disasters contribute in bringing about hunger, famine, poverty and diseases in many parts of the continent. Therefore long term sustainability of communities cannot be attained unless specific actions are taken against the impact of these adverse factors. Specifically, the following alternatives are worth considering:

- Intensified irrigation programs
- Integrated pest management
- Reforestation programs
- Promotion of environmental friendly technologies

**Population growth alternatives:** In light of the rapid population growth throughout the continent, long-term sustainability of communities would require that in each country policies in favor of stabilizing the population be developed, adopted, implemented and enforced. Specific actions that need in particular being considered include:

- Incorporate sexual education in the school curricula and youth education programs as a way to prevent unwanted pregnancies
- Ban wedding of young girls who are less than 18 years old
- Levy higher taxes for large size households
- Provide school incentives for small size families
- Encourage use of contraceptive methods for women who have already more than two children
- Others

**Alternatives to AIDS and other diseases:** Possible alternatives to be considered include:

- Intensified public education on every aspects of aids and other diseases
- Subsidized programs in favor of aids prevention
- Subsidized programs in favor aids patients
- Incorporation of aids in schools curricula and youth education programs

**Political instability:** Possible remedies to political instability and massive killings and displacement should include:

- Incorporation of democracy as a viable system in school curricula and youth education programs
- Establishment of transparent systems of election
- Limited number of terms in office for elected public officials
- Imposed neutrality as a law on military groups and forbidding them for taking part in any political activities
- Allowance for UN forces to intervene in countries where apparent signs of massive killings or genocide are well under way
- Others

**Water pollution:** This situation can be improved if the following alternatives can be implemented:

- Provide a proper waste disposal system in major cities
- Plan and implement an appropriate drainage system in major cities
- Provide toilet facilities for communities both in rural and urban areas
- Others

**Air pollution:** In order to reduce the threats of air pollution on the community sustainability, some of these alternatives may be worth considering:

- Establish a systematic control on all cars and vehicles
- Levy high taxes with required repairs on polluting cars
- Increase the number of green spaces and parks in urban centers and have them planted accordingly
- Others

**Efficient use of resources:** In the long run, the situation can be remedied by considering the following set of alternatives:

- Drastic cut on the use of fossil fuels
- Development of public transportation in lieu of individual transportation that causes more pollution and harm
- Development and promotion of wind, water, and solar energy sources
- Others

**Endangered species:** Possible actions to be taken would include:

- Exhaustive inventory of disappeared or disappearing species
- Control on abusive deforestation activities or hunting
- Protection of disappearing species
- Reinsertion or reintegration of disappeared species into their natural habitats
- Others

## **HOW DO WE GO ABOUT ENHANCING PUBLIC AWARENESS?**

Now that we know what are the issues and what can be done, the question that still remains is how in concrete terms can we go about enhancing public awareness? In concrete terms, two issues ought to be considered. First, we need to identify who should be the actors and second what will be the methods or approaches to be used for enhancing public awareness.

**The actors to be considered for public awareness:** Public awareness essentially requires the interaction of two key players. On the one hand, we need those people who are able to stimulate and maintain the public interest, inform the target groups while persuading them into taking the kind of actions that would contribute in fostering the community sustainability over the long run. On the other hand, we have to precisely

know who are those people or target groups that would be at the receiving end of the process.

With respect to those actors that can sensitize and educate the public about some of the key issues that have been just described, the following specialized groups appear to have the best knowledge and aptitude for doing it. These in particular include:

- Schools: In the school environments, the teachers from primary to university can best sensitize and educate students about important issues pertaining to community sustainability.
- Community level: At the community level, it would probably be best to use existing resource persons or opinion leaders for conveying specific messages whenever it is needed. These opinion leaders may include but not limited to local chiefs, farmers' association group leaders, youth association group leaders, women association group leaders, the village teacher, the village health care worker, the extension agent, the local NGOs representatives, the "*griots*", the senior citizens, etc.
- Other actors to be considered may also include church leaders, communal mayors, city council, or local administration representatives
- With respect to some specific issues or technical problems, high-ranking personalities, such as members of parliament, policy makers, or representatives of the central administration may be considered as well.

The selection of actors for public awareness programs should not be done without carefully analyzing each particular situation and related circumstances, however.

**The methods or approaches to be considered:** With respect to the methods, it is up to each actors to decide which particular methods or approaches would best suit for a given public awareness purpose. Nevertheless, some methods that are time tested and seem to work more often than not include:

- Door to door contacts with concerned parties
- Community group meetings: village meetings
- Formal teaching, workshops, and training
- Market criers and '*griots*'
- Distribution of pamphlets and flyers
- Talk shows through medias (radios, TVs)
- Publicity through radio, TV, and newspapers
- Conveyance of specific messages through sporting events
- Public advertisement and flyers
- Short movies

- Local plays
- Etc.

**From information sharing to community involvement:** Once the information is delivered, the next best-expected thing is for the community to react and take actions according to the very intended purpose of the public awareness exercise. Unfortunately, in most cases, the communities even though receptive to the message could take longer before reacting as expected. In order to remedy the situation by bringing the communities toward getting quickly involved into appropriate action taking, the following set questions that were designed by Phil Bartle (2001) may be used as a effective field testing technique):

- 1) What do we want?
- 2) What do we have?
- 3) How do we use what we have to get what we want?
- 4) What will happen as a result?

Thus, thanks this technique and with the help of the public awareness animator, some concrete action planning and decision making can be made by the local communities for themselves without much difficulties.

### **SPECIFIC ISSUES/RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE RETAINED**

With respect to sub-Saharan Africa, specific issues/recommendations that ought to be retained include:

- Local communities must be sensitized about causes and consequences (short, medium, and long term) consequences of natural and environmental disasters: this can be achieve through special talks, training, film projections/demonstrations, drama plays, educational flyers, and support in various demonstration activities
- As managers and planners of resources, local and central policy makers must also be sensitized about key issues pertaining to community sustainability: this can be achieved through special seminars, workshops, and access to information via readily available information sources, such as websites on the Internet
- More support must be provided to NGOs and institutions that are already involved in public awareness programs.
- Building centers of excellence for research, training, and development on environmental disasters should be strongly considered in each major region of Africa. This indeed will assist in making progress in terms of disasters' prevention and handling of crises in Africa. This of course should be done in accordance with existing efforts and activities that are already on going in the continent.

## CONCLUSION

In short, enhancing public awareness would be essential to increasing the knowledge as well as preparedness of local communities in dealing with most natural and environmental disasters. In sub-Saharan Africa, raising public awareness would be a formidable task, however, considering the relatively high rate of adult illiteracy and various other constraints, such as political instability and ethnic differences that seem to have been plaguing most of the continent for some time now. Because of that, simple techniques similar to those used by extension specialists (demonstrative techniques) as well as information diffusion through media (radio and TV in particular) ought to be considered, especially in rural areas. On the other hand in urban areas, alternative strategies, such as workshops, conferences, as well as interactive and innovative methods like “*Internet*” could be more effective than classic demonstrative techniques. Even in urban areas, the role of media and particularly of TV, radio, and newspapers in passing specific messages to various partners and stakeholders in the communities cannot be overemphasized.

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