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Social security in Africa: New realities

Informing the public:
A challenge for social security schemes

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Introduction

One feature of the last decade of the twentieth century has been the extent to which global communications systems have facilitated interdependence among nation-states and have in turn created a truly global village.

The global communications explosion and implosion arising out of the socio-economic conditions of the twentieth century, facilitated by developments in communications technology, have sent a strong message to all that the Information Age has arrived. This Age is characterized among other features, by the freedom and the opportunity for people to debate and to make decisions in the community, the market place, the home, the work place and the voting booth.

Social security institutions, like all other organizations, are also affected by these developments. Indeed, social security institutions, embracing, as they do, a wide spectrum of activities in the provision of social protection for workers, need to engage in constant communication with their public. From the creation of a social security scheme through different stages of development, dissemination of information is of vital importance to these institutions.

Public information and public relations are, increasingly important for those institutions responsible for social security administration. As Raymond Poirrier pointed out in the 1980s, "informing insured persons of their rights, enabling them to fulfil their legal obligations while stimulating their sense of responsibility, and ensuring the co-operation of the public are all matters of increasing concern for organizations which are well aware that their efficiency would be considerably improved through the use of information techniques".

Social security institutions, therefore, need to apply a whole range of public information tools and techniques.

This report provides a theoretical framework for social security institutions to carry out pro-active public relations with respect to informing their public. In particular, the report highlights the means currently available to ISSA member institutions for communicating with publics; it also presents the summary of the results of a survey on the subject conducted in March 1999 among member institutions in Africa.

The theoretical framework

Definition of concepts

Communication, simply, is a process of exchanging information, imparting ideas or making oneself understood by others. It also includes understanding others in return. Indeed, understanding is critical to the communication process.

If one person sends a message to another who disregards or misunderstands it then communication has not taken place! But if the idea received is the one intended, then communication has taken place.

It is important to mention that although everyone is endowed with some capacity for communicating, some are more endowed than others on account of training or as a natural trait.

In fact communication is an umbrella term to denote the process in which

a wide range of activities and actions are expressed, such as opinions, feelings, information, etc.

Information, refers to that process of communication in which knowledge in the form of facts, news, events, etc., is provided about something or someone.

Public information refers to all actions and activities involving the exchange of knowledge in the form of facts, news, etc. by the wide group referred to as the general public or by the term used by professionals in this field which is publics.

In the technical sense, public information and public relations, are not really interchangeable terms: public relations stands for all communications media through which mutual understanding and goodwill are sought. Public information, however, is more restricted in the sense that it seeks mutual understanding and goodwill only through information.

Objectives of public information

Public information in social security institutions plays a major role in the success and development of programmes as it has an enormous task of creating awareness among insured persons and the general public in understanding the objectives of social security schemes.

Public information has the following objectives whether for a social security organization, a government or any other group:

- Inform the public about the organization's or public's business. In other words, it has to communicate the work of an institution.

- Improve the effectiveness of an organization's operations through appropriate public information techniques. In other words, it has to explain an institution's programme so that its publics can understand and can take the necessary actions to benefit from them.

- Provide feedback to an institution so that its programmes and policies can be modified, amended or continued.

- Advise management on how best to communicate a decision or present a view to the widest number of citizens.

- Serve as an ombudsman. That is, represent the public and listen to their representatives and ensure that their problems are solved.

- Educate internal staff about the role of the mass media and how to work with media representatives.

In this respect, public information attempts to facilitate mutual understanding between the institution and the public it is designed to serve.

Features of public information

Changes in the legal, social and political environments of a social security institution have a direct bearing on the administration of social security schemes. Thus, as schemes respond and/or adapt to their environment, they tend to be more complex in their administration and therefore attract a lot more attention from the insured and uninsured members of the public alike.

In the social security institutions of Africa, there has been recognition that timely processing and payment of benefits is cardinal to the success of social security schemes. The point which the above illustrates is that the myriad of issues which confront social security institutions gives a high profile to its communications function.

In such circumstances, the public information function grows from the simple and routine to often complex and innovative levels straddling over many tasks and involving many more line staff and resources.

The role of public information

The following components of public information highlight the ever-widening and modern role that public information is expected to assume in an institution:

1. **Counselling:** consists of providing advice to management concerning policies, relationships and communications.

2. **Research:** determining attitudes and the behaviour of publics in order to plan appropriate public information strategies. Such research can be used:

    *   to generate mutual understanding; or
    *   to influence and persuade publics.

3. **Media relations:** working with the mass media in seeking publicity or responding to their interests in the organization.

4. **Publicity:** disseminating planned messages through selected media to further the organization's interests.

5. **Employee relations:** responding to problems, informing and motivating an organization's employees.

6. **Community relations:** planned activity with a community to maintain an environment that benefits both the organization and the community.

7. **Public affairs:** developing effective involvement in public policy and helping an organization to adapt to public expectations. The term is also used by government agencies to describe their public relations activities and by many institutions as an umbrella term to describe multiple public relations activities.

8. **Government affairs:** relating directly with legislative and regulatory agencies on behalf of the organization. Lobbying can be part of this task.

9. **Issues management:** identifying and addressing issues of public concern that affect the organization. It can include environmental affairs.

10. **Industrial relations:** relating with other firms in the industry of an organization and with trade associations.

11. **Development/fund-raising:** demonstrating the need for and encouraging the public to support an organization or cause by providing financial contributions.

12. **Special events:** stimulating an interest in a person, product or organization by means of a focussed "happening", also, activities designed to interact with publics and to listen to them.

13. **Marketing communications:** combination of activities designed to sell a product, service or idea including advertising, related materials, publicity, promotion, direct mail, trade shows and special events.

The publics of social security institutions

The term *publics* has traditionally meant any group (or possibly, individual) that has some involvement with an organization - its neighbours, customers, employees, competitors and government regulations. Many people think that *publics* and *audiences* are synonymous. But they are not. The term *audience* suggests a group of people who are recipients of something - a message or a performance. An *audience* is thus inherently passive. But this conflicts with the goal of most public relations programmes which is to stimulate strong audience participation. To help resolve the semantic conflict, a new term that distinguishes between passive audiences and active ones is *publics*. The term *publics* encompasses any group of people tied together, however loosely, by some common bond of interest or concern.

Publics can be described in three ways:

"Nominatively":	giving it a name (e.g. stockbrokers).
"Demographically":	statistical characteristics (such as age, gender, income, education, etc.).
"Psychographically":	defines emotional and behavioural characteristics (e.g. interests, attitudes, beliefs or behaviour).

Public information techniques

There are quite a number of public information techniques that can be used in relation to the following media of communication:

Radio/bill

In the developing countries of Africa, this medium is one of the most widely available to audiences. It is a well tested medium catering to all audiences, whether in terms of language, subject or interest. Since it is relatively cheap and yet has the widest reach, it is ideal for providing and handling news, special events, organized talks and discussions, interviews and documentaries.

Normally, most of the above-mentioned techniques are available. However, an organization may resort to advertising to deliver its messages. It is important to realize, however, that this medium is transient – that is, it is made for the ear and therefore once the broadcast has been made, there is very little opportunity for recall. There is opportunity also for organizations to develop their own radio programmes and participate in sponsored radio programmes.

Television

This is a sophisticated audio-visual medium. Although it has a restricted viewing public in the developing world on account of the inability of development in this part of the world to keep up with technological infrastructure, this medium is increasingly penetrating the countryside and gaining wider viewership. It offers the same opportunities for public information as the radio. However, it is an expensive medium which is not available as freely as the radio. Public information departments can produce corporate video films and put them on this network. As an audio-visual medium, it is the medium of the future.

Print media

The print media includes newspapers, magazines and journals as well as pamphlets and brochures. Annual reports and other publications offer a

veritable store-house of techniques for public information. News, features, interviews and many promotional materials have a ready market in this medium that caters particularly for the literate public.

Special events

This is a proactive activity in which a good public information practitioner can create a high profile for his/her organization by organizing an event that puts it in the public eye. Events such as anniversaries, sod-breaking, open-house, exhibitions and fairs, presentation ceremonies, etc., are all techniques that are used to achieve public information objectives.

Advertising

There is no greater opportunity for any organization to put its message across the way it wishes than through this medium. However, because this is a medium which has to be paid for, the costs could be high. Its limitation is that information in such a medium is thought of as self-serving and therefore is not always taken seriously. Many public information practitioners have sought to minimize the self-serving perception of this medium by normally using the technique of third-party endorsement when necessary.

Outdoor displays

These media are both for advertising and publicity purposes. They are audio-visual facilities which when strategically-planned and well set-out can provide immeasurable assistance to public information. When they are in the electronic mode, they are more appealing and attract more attention. But this is a very expensive medium requiring regular servicing. Outdoor displays which are merely wooden structures, are prone to the vagaries of the weather and may be blown off in windstorms and heavy rains. If devoid of maintenance, they become an eye sore and the source of image problems for their sponsors.

Survey on impact of public information in social security

Backdrop

In 1981, 1982 and 1984 the ISSA General Secretariat launched surveys to obtain information on the scale and the pattern of its member institutions' relations with the media in general and the professional and social security press in particular, as well as the general public through regular publications, information service activities and other methods. The replies from the surveys were grouped according to the most significant characteristics of the members in order to make it easier to grasp and to analyse the data provided. ISSA took into account the characteristics which were likely to affect the institutions' responses; e.g. the region, the level of industrial development and the number of risks covered by the institution. The regional distribution applied to this analysis was that normally used by the ISSA, i.e. in Africa, America, Asia and Oceania and Europe.

With regard to the level of industrial development, the ISSA adopted two methods of classification, i.e. "industrialized countries" and "developing countries". Countries were classified according to the proportion of the Gross National Product attributed to the industrial sector, the share of industrial production represented by the manufacturing industry and the proportion of the population employed in industry. As for the risks covered, the distinction was made between those institutions dealing with one of the five main risk groups and those dealing with more than one. In this context, ISSA used the terms "single risk" and "multiple risk institutions".

The information obtained through these surveys indicated that the main methods used by affiliate members to implement their public information policies were as follows:

Media methods

Press release

The surveys noted that in Europe, America and Asia nine out of ten affiliate member institutions that replied to the questionnaire published press

releases (six out of ten in Africa). This was considered the best method to get their message across to the mass media which acted as relays and amplifiers for the general public.

Press conference

It was observed that press conferences were rarely organized on a regular basis. They seemed to be held ad hoc as necessary, in order to disseminate particular information which they wished to bring to the notice of journalists. This observation applied in all the regions irrespective of the level of industrialization or the number of risks administered.

Radio broadcasts

This media was the common means of communication among the member institutions and the radio was used by most of them to inform insured persons of their rights and the general public about the activities of the institutions. It was clear that broadcasts were normally prepared directly by the public information unit of the member institutions working in collaboration with journalists from radio stations. It stressed that radio communication was commonly used by member institutions in developing countries. It was often the only efficient means of reaching illiterate populations or those that were too poor to have a television set, even one collectively owned by villagers or production units.

Television broadcast

It was observed that television broadcasting was extremely popular and was used mainly by institutions in industrialized countries and those in certain developing countries which were well equipped in the audio visual sphere.

Telecommunications and data processing

In several countries (North America and Europe) there were many public data banks (parliaments, ministries, information centres, etc.) connected to a computer terminal which included practical information on the various branches of social security. The public information units of the

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member institutions involved were aware of the growing potential of this form of communication.

Articles and announcements in newspapers and magazines aimed at the general public

In all the regions, particularly in developing countries, the written press for the general public (mass media) remained a favorite tool for communication with the public on the part of member institutions.

The official journal

Responses to the survey indicated that in many countries (with different economic systems), the member institutions that could be considered governmental institutions, used the official journal to bring to the notice of the general public the most important information regarding their activities. Other institutions used the specialized press: trade unions or employers' publications, newspapers and magazines providing information through specialized publications on social security.

Direct methods used by member institutions in the field of public information

Publications

These included reports, brochures, leaflets, booklets and other documents published by the member institutions for the use of the general public. This form of direct communication which did not rely on the media was frequently used by member institutions whether in the form of regular or occasional publications.

Direct methods other than publications

In industrialized countries one institution out of two participated in fairs and exhibitions. The proportion was slightly lower in developing countries. However, it was observed that there was a bigger difference in the average number of fairs and exhibitions in which the institutions participated.

International exchange and activities

The public information units of certain member institutions which replied to the questionnaire did not limit their activities to their own country. Naturally, there existed international co-operation among both developed and developing countries. This was based on exchanges of press releases, publication of information on new legislation and also, in certain situations, on bilateral discussions. In some cases, public information units of certain member institutions participated in international conferences on problems connected with communication and information generally.

Conclusions of the ISSA surveys

From the analysis of the ISSA surveys, it was noted that no less than 1,500 trained officers were employed by member institutions in the field of public information service. This staff deployed their efforts over a wide range of areas: the written press, radio, television, films, slides; telecommunications, data processing, exhibitions, publications, to name only a few. These activities which usually absorbed only a relatively small part of resources available to member institutions were considered increasingly important by the administrative bodies of the institutions.

The analysis also showed that cultural differences between countries and the wide variety of social security situations which existed throughout the world led to a multitude of different approaches to the problems connected with public information. The statistical information gathered from the surveys revealed a remarkable progress achieved by member institutions in the past two decades in the field of public information. In this respect, the organizations responsible for social security in both industrialized and developing countries directed their efforts towards two main aims. The first was connected with the fact that social security legislation could only achieve its objectives if the potential beneficiaries were aware of their rights and claimed the benefits guaranteed by the social security programme. Recent studies indicate that failure to make use of social benefits, rather than their misuse, is one of the principal problems of social security today.

In other ISSA studies, the following facts were established:

Financial and human resources

- That all member institutions stressed that public information was a matter of political will and that a great deal was needed to bring it about.

- However, in some cases where the will existed, the financial resources were lacking.

- The good news was that member institutions in Africa did not suffer as badly as those in some industrialized countries in terms of financial resources.

- With regard to management, it was still the member institutions in the Americas which were best equipped with public communication units; nevertheless in Africa 64 per cent of all institutions were equipped with such units, which was an increase from 50 per cent in 1982.

- The names given to the units were changing. The word in vogue was "communications". The term "corporate affairs" was also becoming common.

- Increasingly, the public information services reported directly to the Chief Executive.

- The numbers of staff engaged in public information also increased. This was particularly striking in Africa where the average staff level rose from one or two to five or six.

- Professional journalists, public relations experts, advertising practitioners and opinion pools and lobbying specialists formed the bulk of the public information practitioners.

- Most institutions tended to personalize information by selecting a number of target population groups.

- The most common target group were the insured persons themselves who were sub-divided into categories according to the benefits to which they were entitled. Retired persons were also an important target group.

- In general, small-scale advertising with specific targets was more cost-effective.

- An increasing tendency was noted for social security to "enter the workplace".

New techniques

- Many social security organizations in the industrialized world installed direct telephone lines (free hot-lines) to provide callers with information. No mention was made here of Africa.

- The field in which the most spectacular breakthroughs were reported were those involving the use of computers and office technology. These were mostly in the industrialized countries.

- While not all social security institutions could afford to resort to the most up-to-date technology, many made up for this by using other methods.

New survey on Africa

Recent survey on communications systems used by ISSA member institutions in Africa

In order to obtain up-to-date information to prepare this report, a questionnaire was sent by the ISSA Regional Office for Africa to all member institutions in the region.

The survey was carried out with the following objectives:

- Enquire into the structure, authority and staffing of public information units in the respective institutions.

- Establish the tools used by member institutions in their relations with the public.

- Establish the target groups of the member institutions.

- Establish the subject-matter of member institutions' contacts with their public.

In view of the time available for undertaking this survey not all salient issues affecting the internal communications system could be investigated. Also the questionnaire was structured as a portmanteau type to facilitate easy analysis. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to provide a detailed report at this stage, thus only a summary of the results is provided hereunder.

Summary of survey results

Responses

At the time of writing this report, responses to the questionnaire had been received from 26 member institutions representing 17 countries in Africa.

Establishment of public information units

Only 2 out of the 26 institutions which responded have not established a public information unit. The majority of such units were established before the 1990s. The earliest were introduced as far back as before 1965.

Lack of units within institutions

Forty-two per cent of respondents described their information set-up as *simple units*, with *Departments* accounting for 27 per cent and 15 per cent being *Sub-Departments*.

Staffing

The average staff strength was about 13 per information unit with 87 being the highest in one institution and one staff being the lowest.

In terms of senior staff strength, out of a total staff strength of 403 in the public information units of the institutions, 71 are senior staff. The rest are junior staff.

Activities

Meetings stood out as the major type of activity most institutions used in facilitating contacts with their publics. This was followed by *seminars, radio/TV programmes and interviews* in that order.

In terms of frequency, most institutions indicated that these activities occur on a *monthly* basis, followed by those who stated that they were *occasional* encounters. The least frequent were *every three months* and *every six months*.

Media systems used

The *telephone* was the most widely used system followed by *radio, television, newspapers, newsletters* and *brochures.*

Significantly, the Internet is hardly used.

In terms of the frequency of the media used, most respondents indicated that it was *monthly.* The least frequent was *daily.*

Public (target groups)

With a categorization of *employees, employers, general public* and *others* as given target groups or publics, most respondents were equally divided between *employees* and *employers* as their key publics followed by the general public.

Subject matter of contact with the publics

Financing and *collection of contributions* issues formed the predominant subject-matter of contacts of most institutions with their publics. This was followed by the *introduction of new benefits* and *qualifying conditions for benefits* and *claim procedures* tying for the next position while issues about the *structure of the organization* were placed third.

Evaluation of programmes

Surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the institutions do not conduct any evaluation of their programmes. Of the few who do, *interviews* with members of the public is the most frequently used technique.

Attitude of the public

The majority of respondents who evaluate their activities reported a positive feedback from their publics.

Conclusion

Public information in any social security programme should be designed to suit an environment in which the scheme operates. It should be capable of differentiating information provided for sophisticated publics from less sophisticated publics.

Social security institutions depend very largely for their efficiency and success upon popular interest and support of their activities. The programme is a tripartite function requiring enduring partnership between the employees, employers and government.

In this connection, public information renders great help in achieving this partnership. As social security institutions serve members of different stations in life, numerous complaints from different quarters are normally made and received. These complaints are about matters concerning registration, contributions and benefits.

The key to the public image of the institution is the creation of a conducive atmosphere for its smooth functioning. It is the public information unit/department which builds up the image of the institution on the one hand and safeguards the image on the other by ensuring the fullest co-ordination and co-operation between the public and the scheme.

There is no doubt that public information has come to stay in social security. Its role will be enhanced more and more with time in Africa, whether it undergoes a change in title or not. African member institutions of ISSA will need to improve their public information services by engaging more professionals, allocating more resources and continually adopting a positive stand towards the issues that confront them.

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