

**MEDIA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE THIRD WORLD: THE PROSPECTS  
AND CHALLENGES**

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**Abstract**

The relationship between the mass media and development is mutual and symbiotic in nature. Each complements the other in mutually-inclusive aspects. Sustainable development entails meeting equitable development and environmental needs of present and future generations. There can never be meaningful development without communication and for a nation's growth in socioeconomic development; the media must be supportive by giving priority to news and pieces of information that are potentially development-driven. Pathetically, media system in the Third World is still behind in meeting and sustaining development goals in developing nations due to total or partial dependency on foreign media for media content or technology. This paper identifies the prospects and challenges facing the media as agents of sustainable development in the Third World. The paper equally explores avenues in which government and media can work in partnership to ensure that media assist in the planned beneficial development of a nation.

**Keywords:** Mass media, Sustainable Development, Third World

**Introduction**

Development is a multi-faceted process as Rodney (1972) rightly posits that development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material wellbeing. A society develops economically as its members increase jointly their capacity of dealing with the environment. Development is a holistic effort to improving a system thus Dang & Sui (2015) agree that development issues are complex and multifaceted. There is no one single pathway for economic development that all countries can pursue. In the long term, the economic development process requires changes in policies to account for new emerging factors and trends. It then, implies that designing these economic development policies, there is also need

to take into consideration the social, cultural, political systems and institutions as well as their changing interactions over time in a country.

From a practical sense, the choice of term ‘underdevelopment’ for a country’s economic growth has become distasteful due to the dynamic nature of development. This is because development is an ongoing process in which countries strive to improve on their socioeconomic wellbeing. The use of ‘Third World’ in reference to the developing economies of Africa, Asia, Latin-America and the Caribbean was due to low standard of living and problems of development in the Third World countries. They are characterised by low levels of education, poor infrastructure, improper sanitation and poor access to health care mean living conditions are inferior. On the contrary, Nwodu & Fab-Ukozor (2003) observe that developed economies are characterised by better living standard than the developing economies.

The tenet of sustainable development provides a holistic application of the indices of development to socio-economic, environmental, cultural and political wellbeing of a country. It refers to the ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz (2005) state that the World Commission on Environment and Development was initiated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1982, and its report, *Our Common Future*, was published in 1987. It was chaired by then–Prime Minister of Norway Gro Harlem Brundtland, thus earning the name the “Brundtland Commission.” The commission’s membership was split between developed and developing countries. Its roots were in the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment—where the conflicts between environment and development were first acknowledged—and in the 1980 World Conservation Strategy of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature

Soubbotina (2004), notes that sustainable development could probably be otherwise called ‘equitable and balanced’ meaning that, in order for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interest of different groups of people, within the same generation and among generations, and do so simultaneously in three major interrelated areas – economic, social and environmental. In essence, sustainable development is about equity, defined as equality of opportunities for wellbeing, as well as comprehensiveness of objectives (Melkote, 2016; Daly, 2002 & Soubbotina, 2004). It is an extension of development in the sense that it applies a holistic approach in integration of economic, social and environmental objectives in an approach to scientific analysis, governance, problem solving and human action (Sachs, 2015)

The success of meaningful sustainable development must be tied to available information on development efforts. Communication is a veritable tool of national development. Development communication, for instance, deals with facilitating communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth (Kenechukwu, 2015). Communication is, therefore, central to the process of development by creating conducive environment for participatory development and environment. Summarily, the relationship between communication and development is interdependent and symbiotic in nature. For the purpose of this study, Nigeria is used as a case study.

### **Statement of Problem**

Despite the fact that sustainable development project was designed to create room for equitable development and even distribution of development growth across the developed – developing economies, it is however, pathetic that the developing countries of Africa (including Nigeria) have remained least developed irrespective of global efforts for even sustainable development. These setbacks were caused by some factors such as backwardness in technology, low standard of living, economic recession, bad government and corruption in institutions of government. Pathetically, Africa is the only continent with a weak and staggering implementation of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is due to instability in government thus new governments tend to drop the development plans of previous government to initiate a new development plan which may not be completed before the end of government tenure.

There is also the question of imbalance in communication flow from the media-producer nations of developed economies and the media-consumer nations of the developing economies. Information is at the centre of sustainable development and dependence on media technology from the West has equally

widened the gap in the attainment of sustainable development in developing world. The control of global media by the developed economies have further stagnated development efforts of the developing economies through news monopoly and communication imbalance. To achieve news monopoly and imbalance, the western powers often adopt two strategies: shaping the communication channel and determining media content and market penetration. As long the chain of dependency is still tied around African economies, the attainment of sustainable development remains a mirage in developing countries. Against these problems associated with sustainable development in developing, this study attempts to identify the prospects and challenges of sustainable development in the Third World countries.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Generally, the study seeks to discuss the nature and role of mass media as agents of attaining sustainable development in the developing nations. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- a. To examine the role of mass media in sustainable development.
- b. To examine the attitude of developing economies towards sustainable development.
- c. To explore possible prospects and challenges of sustainable development
- d. To proffer possible solutions and recommendations for effective sustainable development in developing economies.
- e.

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Understanding Sustainable Development**

The major tenet of sustainable development is the fact that it is not just an improvement in a system but that such improvement are further sustained through a continuous process of improvement. A development is not sustainable if it degenerates downward in quality. Arua and Duru (2010,p.1) defines development ‘as a qualitative improvement in the living standard of members of the society.’ The quality of life in any society is measured by such indicators as literacy rate, rate of employment, distribution of income, availability of social amenities, decent housing, improved medical facilities, equity and educated citizenry. Sustainability of these developments is measured by its ability to equitably meet development and environmental needs of present and future generations. Boon (2006) defines sustainable development as an alternative development strategy for improving the living conditions of the human population without degrading the quality of the environment. It is also described as a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs. The core of sustainable development is to take care of present as well as future needs of man and the society.

According to Soubbotina (2004,p.9), sustainable development could probably be called ‘equitable and balanced’ meaning that, in order for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interests of different groups of people, within the same generation and among generations, and do so simultaneously in three major interrelated areas – economic, social and environmental. So sustainable development is about equity, defined as equality of opportunities for wellbeing as well as about comprehensiveness of objectives. Owolababi & Olu-Owolabi (2009) state that sustainable development could be seen as the totality of the good life and overall welfare of the people in contradiction of mere economic growth, hitherto erroneously considered as development. A holistic definition of sustainable definition is the ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). From the above, Harris, 2003; Dernbach, 2003 & Stoddart, (2011) recognised three essential aspects of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental development.

**Economic Sustainability:** One of the major parameters of measuring level of development is the economic variables. Harris (2003) states that an economically sustainable system must be able to produce goods and services on a continuing basis, to maintain manageable levels of government and external debt and to avoid extreme sectoral imbalances which damage agricultural or industrial production. Ebiringa, (2012) and Kenechukwu (2015) hold that one major means of boosting economic sustainable development of developing nations is through entrepreneurial development. The quality of performance of the entrepreneur determines whether capital would grow rapidly or slowly and whether the growth involves innovation where new products and production techniques are developed.

**Social Sustainability:** Harris (2003) points out that a socially sustainable system must achieve fairness in distribution and opportunity, adequate provision of social services including health and education, gender equity and political accountability and participation. Soubbotina (2004,p.9), preferred explaining sustainable development as 'equitable and balanced' which means that there should be equitable distribution of wealth and amenities.

**Environmental Sustainability:** An environmentally sustainable system must maintain a stable resource base, avoiding over-exploitation of renewable resource systems or environmental sink functions and depleting non-renewable resources only to the extent that investment is made in adequate substitutes (Harris. 2003). Dernbach (1998) advocates that effective governance requires a nation to consider and protect the environment and natural resources on which its current and future development depend. As a member of international and global community on sustainable development, Nigeria share in the effects of technological advancement specifically environment management (Adejumo & Adejumo, 2014).

### **Mass Media and Sustainable Development: A Symbiotic Relationship**

The relationship between and development is mutually inclusive and symbiotic in nature. Communication, in its wide range of conceptions and applications, is instrumental in dealing effectively with the issues of sustainable development. Okenwa (2002) observes that communication is central to the process of development to the extent that the dependence of one on the other has virtually been taken for granted. The relationship is interdependent and symbiotic in nature. Communication creates good atmosphere for sustainable development and provides the medium of disseminating development messages and mobilise the populace for development projects.

The mass media have contributed immensely to the sustainable development of a country. Khalid, Ahmed & Mufti (2015) state that the media, with specific reference to the collective entity of newspapers, radio, television and the Internet, are important in shaping the development process of a country. The media set the public agenda and act as the gatekeeper of public issues. They perform the watchdog role especially in political transparency and fight against corruption. According to Kenechukwu (2014), information is imperative for the success of any development project. The rationale for sustainable development, therefore, can first be understood in the context of the role which the mass media can play in development of nations. The mass media set agenda for public discussion and can mobilise the citizens for societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war and sustainable development.

An offshoot of the role of mass media in sustainable development is development communication which refers to the process of intervening in a systemic or strategic manner with either media (print, radio, telephony, video, and the Internet), or education (training, literacy, schooling) for the purpose of positive social change. The change could be economic, personal, as in spiritual, social and cultural, or political (Mcphail, 2009). Development communication, in this context, means an integration of mass media in the modernisation process. This integration is a continual process just as Baran and Davis (2006) remark that until a nation is well established and its economic development well underway, mass media must be supportive rather than critical of government. To operate effectively, Kenechukwu (2015, p.295) maintains that 'the mass media should accept and carry out positive development tasks that aid national development.'

### **Sustainable Development in Developing Nations: Prospects and Challenges**

Sustainable development is built on three solid foundations: economic sustainability, social sustainability and environmental sustainability. The developing nations have approached the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals with mixed reactions. While some countries like Nigeria and South Africa have been struggling with the prospects and challenges of sustainable development, other developing economies are saddled with meeting basic human needs. Nigeria, for instance, enjoys stable governance unlike some developing countries under the shackles of dictatorial regime. In Nigeria, there is relative peace and respect for human rights through the judiciary, access to quality healthcare services, functional transportation system and working education institutions etc .

Apart from the prospects of Nigeria's sustainable development, there are few challenges affecting the success of sustainable development such as (a) corruption at various levels of government, (b) low living standard due to recession, (c) mono-economy system in which government expenditure is tied to global oil price, (d) ineffective policies about national economic crisis, (e) population explosion leading to starvation, (f) poor media content and programming, (g) poverty, (h) inadequate education and information system, (i) extreme rich-poor divide, (j) natural disasters, (k) oil pipe-line vandalisation and (l) ethno-religious violence etc.

The mass media, as agents of sustainable development have contributed to the following development goals of developing nations viz:

- Production of movies and documentaries on government's development projects; for example, the need to keep our drainage systems clean or stop violence on animals.
- Writing of editorials and features as means of promoting government development efforts.
- Production of radio and television jingles containing advertising messages of development efforts of government, corporate organisation and individuals.
- Use of press releases to address certain government issues on development.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sustainable development aims to maintain economic advancement and progress while protecting the long-term value of the environment thereby providing a framework for the integration of environment policies and development strategies (United Nations General Assembly, 1987). The study anchors on the modernisation theory and dependency theory.

The tenets of modernisation theory hinge on the assumption that a shift in modern applications, ideologies and technology increases the level of development in a society. It attempts to identify the social variables that contribute to social progress and development of societies and seeks to explain the process of social change. Modernisation entails transformation from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial society (Kenechukwu, 2015). Modernisation theory is credited to David McClelland (1961) in his attempt to explain the differences between societies in social and technological advancement. The studies of Harrison (1988); Webster (1984) and Melkote (2016) agree that the theory demonstrated to the world that newly independent countries could sustain development if they adopted Western strategies. According to Melkote (2016), the dominant paradigm of modernisation proposes that industrialisation was considered the main route to successful economic growth. Development performance was measured by quantitative indicators such as: gross national product (GNP) and per capita income. These indicators were considered objective and straightforward to measure especially when compared with alternative concepts such as freedom, justice and human rights.

Applying communication to this theory, it is observed that at both the macro and micro levels, communication was viewed as a product and reinforcement of economic growth and development. In essence, proponents of modernisation theory believe that modernisation is tied with industrialisation and the personal qualities that are likely to result from working in factories. Viewed from a communication perspective, the theory argues that communication scholars aligned with the perspective that supports global and national policies that facilitated 'free flows' of media and information technology content. Collaborating with above assertions, Elliott (2006) and Servaes & Malikhao (2002) agree that the modernisation thesis assumed that many development problems of the underdeveloped world would be solved quickly through the transfer of finance, technology and experience and experience from the developed world. The major critique of the modernisation theory is that in practice, it accelerated the westernised elite structure or urbanisation. According to Servaes & Malikhao (2002), under the influence of the actual development in most Third World countries, which did not turn out to be as justified as the modernisation theory predicted.

On the other hand, the dependency theory identifies colonialism and western capitalism as responsible for underdevelopment. The assumption of the dependency perspective holds that developing countries depend on the developed countries to satisfy certain needs. In modern society, neo-colonialism is a new and subtle form of the dependency perspective in which new relations with Western industrialised countries have continued their political and economic domination of their former colonies (Ogar, 2007). Servaes &

Malikhao (2002) state that the main cause of the chronic backwardness of the developing countries, since the main interest of Western monopoly capitalism was to prevent, or, if that was impossible, to slow down and to control the economic development of underdeveloped countries. Elliott (2006) rather argues that the assertion in dependency theory was that underdevelopment was not the result of any inadequacies in economic, social or environmental conditions within those countries themselves, but the direct outcome of development elsewhere and the manner in which those countries were incorporated into the operations of the international capitalist system, i.e. the structural disadvantages of these countries and regions.

The dependency theory is an offshoot of Marx and Lenin's idea of the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeois class and Lenin's concept of imperialism. To this effect, Head (1991) asserts that the growth of the advanced industrialised countries in the world today means the concurrent underdevelopment of those countries whose economic surplus the rich countries exploit. Major assumptions of the dependency theory identify (a) persistent poverty in the Third World countries is caused by exposure to economic, political and social influences to the advanced industrialised countries and it is an image of its dependency, (b) the economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others, (c) the underdevelopment of a country or region is linked to the development of another country or outside region, (d) it leads to communication imbalance and media imperialism.

Applying the dependency theory to the place of mass media towards sustainable development, it is evident that the media provide the platform for sustainable development through information, education and mobilisation functions. However, the dependency theory has been criticised on the grounds that it leads to communication imbalance and media imperialism. Ekeanyanwu (2015) maintains that in international communication, imbalance refers to the unequal flow of mass media messages from the First World or the industrialised countries of the West to the Third World also known as the underdeveloped or developing nations. Citing example of such imbalance in information flow, Kenekwue (2015) states that a critical study of the world communication shows absolute domination of the media system of the developing nations. News on the West is always presented in a form and manner that portrays the West as civil, development-oriented while news on Africa (including Nigeria) is always portrayal of strife, poverty, terrorism and endless cases of child abuse and violation of human rights. The picture is presented in a lopsided manner to belittle Africans and glorify the West. Critics of dependency theory have pointed out this problem of communication imbalance as a problem of sustainable development in developing economies. Imbalance in the flow of global news and information is at the root of the call for a New World Information and Communication Order.

At the other side of the continuum, the dependency theory has been ascribed as major cause of media imperialism in which absolute domination of the media content and programming of the West dominate the media output of the developing nations with the intent of causing outright erosion of the socio-cultural values of developing nations. To this effect, Kenekwue (2011) and Amadi (2011) agree that media imperialism results from the actual export of media content. The market penetration is achieved through bombardment of global market with foreign media contents to the detriment of cultural heritage of the media user. The effect is that these media contents carry development messages often designed and packaged based on the socio-cultural values of the exporting country.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Sustainable development strives when a development is continuous and lasting for present and future generation. It equally involves equitability and fairness. It is a notion, a movement and an approach covering all development efforts that address the economic empowerment, social integration and environmental development.

The study concludes with the following recommendations:

- a. Government should review the current national sustainable development plan to see whether it has achieved its aims otherwise, it should be reviewed with a view to improving on it.
- b. Since sustainable development is all about equity and fairness, the three arms of government should be independent of each other in operation but symbiotic in principle.
- c. Government should review current education curriculum to create room for entrepreneurial development courses aimed at self-reliance and self-employment.

- d. Government should diversify the economy from a mono-economy to a poly-economy in which the nation will no longer depend absolutely on oil but explore other natural and agricultural resources.
- e. There should be emphasis on entrepreneurial development. This will help to reduce unemployment.
- f. Government should review national environmental health policy and oil/gas policy with a view to eradicating oil, land and sea pollutions.
- g. There is need to review Land policy in Nigeria
- h. There is need for improved research in agriculture and other non-oil natural resources with the intent of facilitating a shift from oil dependence to non-oil sufficiency.

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