

## **THE MASS MEDIA AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is intended to expand the significant role of the mass media on poverty alleviation in Nigeria, the significance of media is more easily recognized than defined. This is the prevailing situation in many developing countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa, where about 75 per cent of its population, are women, youths and children living in both urban and rural areas live without the basic necessities of life. The excuse for the increase of poverty in these societies has been tagged the acronym “irresponsible governance” this is an off shoot of inconsistent economic policies. In other words the paper tries to bring to light the relationship between the mass media, governance and poverty. Using the content analysis method to put information together. The gathered information revealed that the press has not performed creditably well in the coverage of poverty related issues in Nigeria. It also showed that rural communities were not only neglected in news reports but the rural news was found to be lacking in development contents. The paper reasoned that national or regional mass media have been found to be unable to cater for the development information needs of Nigeria’s sharply divergent urban-rural populace and therefore the need for a more rural oriented dissemination of information.*

Key words.; mass media, poverty reduction, governance and economic policies.

### **Introduction**

The important contributing role of the mass media in the reduction of poverty among Asia, Latin America , Africa and in particular Nigeria. Policy change has been the result of the information available to the general public which has resulted to a change in political ideology, this is a resultant effect of mass media, which has become a vital force in raising public awareness and debate, even if they may not be direct policy actors or even consider themselves as having an obligation to influence policy and change in the society. High-quality public service and public interest journalism in particular, argues, that those wishing to encourage the media to strengthen its coverage of poverty reduction related issues should recognise and support the ability of relevant parts of the mass media, in principle, to play such critically independent roles.

Poverty, as witnessed by the public action accompanying the MDGs, has climbed up the political agenda. Reducing poverty has been transformed from a ‘worthy cause’ to a challenge in the public eye that is much more newsworthy for journalists. This offers significant opportunities for those wishing to engage the media.

Not only are the vital issues at stake in policy-making of potential interest to the media and those wishing to engage journalists (such as the transparency of national budgets) are also of relevant role. As communication strategies are indispensable to involving the public and the rural poor. Communicating and informing a wide range of audiences on poverty reduction issues provides the platform and forum to reflect on different public views, including those of the rural poor people providing an inclusive platform for public debate scrutinizing and holding all actors to account for their actions, acting as a force for more transparent and accountable decision-making relevant to poverty reduction.

The question of governance and poverty in the midst of plenty, vast Arable and fertile land for agriculture, human and natural mineral resources, as it concerns Nigeria is ironical. Contemporary development thinkers have reasoned and attributed Nigeria’s poverty to irresponsible and irresponsible leaders. Oteh (2002) .

The World Bank (1992) defined governance as the means by which power is exercised in the management of a country’s human and natural resources to engender sustainable development. UNRISD (2000) and Cardoso (2001) however, agreed that governance that will engender sustainable development

must be associated with well thought-out development policy and management, adequately organised market economy with effective liberal democracy.

Corruption is a fundamental issue that should not be overlooked not minding the fact that it is a Global challenge but in Nigeria, corruption has become a way of living and doing Government work, so we can see as of today. The Transparency International (TI) in its 1996 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) rated Nigeria as the most corrupt nation out of 54 countries surveyed worldwide. This record was repeated in 1997 when Nigeria was rated 52nd out of 52 nations surveyed. Although, each succeeding government claimed to be fighting corruption, but the more efforts directed at it the more pervasive it becomes. Over the years, large sum of public fund meant for infrastructural development and poverty reduction programs have ended up in private accounts of public officers.

That governance is an instrument of administrative order, authority and control presupposes that, to effectively and profitably exercise the power and authority to benefit the populace, there must be means of information sharing between the government and the people, and as such the role of the mass media can never be over emphasized.

As a critical instrument in government the place of the Mass media has become loud in the Globalization trend of the world today and Nigeria in particular as it constitutes the heart beat that determines and controls the socio-economic and political development of world societies, this is in essence because it lubricates the channel of information between the people and those in control of managing the instrument of the State.

There is no need to over emphasize the fact that progressive policies and decisions are made on the basis of the quality of information at the disposal of a responsible and responsive leader. In other words, it is the information and knowledge about the desires of the people are the basic ingredient that decision makers need to respond to the opportunities and challenges in their economic and political jurisdiction.

For example, the mass media, particularly the radio has become the instrument that is used to propagate government programs on poverty alleviation at the community levels.

It has also become the tool for effectively educating the people on their civic responsibilities to the state; that while the government makes effort to develop the rural communities, people are expected to meet up with their obligation of paying rates and taxes. The press, through comprehensive and continuous reportage sensitizes the people to the misconduct of their leaders as well as stimulate agitation for reforms that will create positive attitude and change from their leaders.

The place of the press in our society, which basically is to inform, educate and monitor the society especially amongst the literate populace. The place of the print, radio and television all work together for the good of every society. They work hand in hand. Thus it is possible for the press to inform the people on what is happening, list all the options available, and monitor the way affairs are being run. In some countries, these roles are constitutionally assigned to the press while in some they are either implied or the press simply assume these roles out of popular conventional practice. The latter is the case of most African countries, perhaps with the exception of countries like Nigeria and South Africa where the roles are constitutionally assigned. For instance in Nigeria, section 22 of our present constitution states *'the obligation of the mass media to the nation'*. It reads,

*'The press radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this [constitution] and accountability of the government to the people.'*

The question to ask is, does any of these objectives include poverty elimination?

Section 16 subsection 1(a) perhaps answers this. It states,

*'The state shall harness the resources of the nation and promote national prosperity and an efficient a dynamic and self reliant economy.'*

And this position is further strengthened by section 2(d) where it is stated that,

*'That suitable and adequate shelter, suitable and adequate food, reasonable national minimum living wage, old age care and pensions and unemployment, sick benefits and welfare of the disabled are provided for all citizens'*. These are some of the provisions in the Nigerian constitution directed at addressing poverty and the press is enjoined to uphold their implementation. Although, these parts of the constitution are not justice-able, they definitely provide the ideal, which any reasonable nation and its institutions must aspire to.

### **Challenges of Mass Media**

The paper at this point takes a look at the various challenging situations faced daily by journalist and constraints that hinder the ability of journalists to perform these public service and public interest roles. Indeed, Asia, Latin America and especially in Nigeria the media is still at her infant stage battling to cope with it International colleagues and the pressure of Globalization.

The paper therefore urges all policy actors, including international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donors, not just to recognize the media's potential as a much-needed independent, indirect contributor

to the development process, but also to understand and help address the sector's own multiple development support needs. With both policymakers and civil society organisations (CSOs) stressing the importance of 'good governance', the paper argues it is crucial to support the potential power of the media's highly relevant scrutiny role. Commercial and political pressures on the media

One major constraint noted is the pressures of commercial survival and growth in the wake of recent media liberalisation. While increased media

freedoms have been welcome in the wake of individuals and state controlled mass media and communication out fits, and heightened competition threatens diversity of coverage and quality of content as the increased number of media players standardize outputs in pursuit of conventional, better-off audiences. In this climate poverty reduction may not be seen as an 'attractive' subject, with mainstream public affairs reporting and tending to focus on subjects such as personality-based coverage of elite politics. The need for advertising revenue has similarly often compounded the pressure on editorial space, also making the media more vulnerable to outside commercial and political pressures of various kinds. Resource and expertise problems. The structural problems of media finance affect working journalists, who are often under-skilled, under-trained, poorly paid and exploitatively employed.

Time and resources may not be available to fund the research needed for stories on poverty reduction, especially ones informed by poor community members.

views. In turn, journalists may lack the knowledge and practical skills to gather a wide range and analysis information on poverty reduction issues.

They are also hindered by frequent official secrecy, bureaucratic red tapism and an apparent difficulty to rely on state and government sources of information, even when it is in short supply or difficult to access and in worst situation False information.

Many journalists are unable or unprepared to track down and use alternative information sources, missing out in stories. This weakness is not only due to skill deficiencies, but reflects problematic professional practices associated with the alleged shortcomings of 'event-' and 'statement-based' reporting, which, though a crucial media activity, often lacks analytical depth.

Some of the challenges faced by journalist could also be relevant to the media in Industrial countries of the West, despite the reality of their economic strength and the level of resources at their disposal, are still confronted with Mass media courage reportage as it concerns the poor.

The mass media is faced with great and enormous challenge not minding the society in discourse, e.g amongst the industrial western countries, the media is constantly harassed and they find both their life's and jobs regularly at the risk of gathering vital information as it concerns the poor and poverty related issues.. This challenge is a vital one, given, for example, the complexities of the good governance debate, the need for stronger public understanding of the multiple accountabilities and interests of foreign aid and the increasingly international nature of economic activity.

While some alternative media, such as community radio, have a more direct mandate to address development issues such as poverty reduction the mainstream media have a much wider and more complex range of institutional and societal accountabilities. Considering the heterogeneity and wide-ranging functions of the traditional mass media in response to the multiple needs of its different audiences, it is unlikely that this sector as a whole would be concerned with the challenges of poverty reduction.

There has been growing attention in recent years to the potential of communication to help boost the effectiveness of policies and strategies to combat poverty in low-income developing countries where the daily realities of deprivation and social exclusion are experienced acutely.

One neglected aspect of this emerging discussion, however, has been the independent role that the mass media could play in such countries.

By informing the public and highlighting the vital issues and policy decisions at stake, it could help nurture the buoyant climate of public concern and debate that customarily spurs into action those with the power to make a difference in society.

The mass media and poverty eradication is a key part of the media or individual journalists, the sector in effect shapes and reflects public attitudes and climates of political opinion. This in itself makes it a force to be considered and recognised. Within public affairs coverage, for example, there are countless examples of how the force of effective journalism – from ground-breaking news articles to hard-hitting human stories and campaigning reporting – can affect decision-making in both public and private spheres.

In other words, policy actors should recognise – and support – effective journalism as a public good in its own right. Indeed, when it comes to an increasingly important public policy matter such as poverty reduction, the media can play vitally important roles in shaping information provision to the public and contributing to the quality of public discourse. These include:

- \* scrutiny: examining the effectiveness of different actors' approaches to tackling policy challenges and holding influential parties to account for their actions

- \* providing an open forum for coverage and reflection of issues relevant to public audiences, and, in the interests of balance, to help to bring those with less power and influence into public exchanges and debate.

In the case of poverty reduction, the latter would include covering poor people's views of the problems and challenges they face and of the solutions they feel are needed to reduce poverty.

'The media has tended to give the microphone to the politicians, the company chief executives and to the NGOs. But it has not done enough to take the microphone to the slum areas so the people can tell us how they are coping with poverty.'

The effective role of the Newspapers which tend to cover more poverty-related issues than TV, and often provide the most in-depth coverage – particularly quarterly, monthly or weekly publications. And although the content of print media is not necessarily as up to the minute as television, it is a less transitory source of information as it can be used for at least the whole of a day. Circulation is often higher than thought as a single newspaper is often read by several people. Low literacy levels nevertheless mean that newspapers tend to have a more limited circulation. In African countries, local or district-level newspapers published in local languages are viewed as unprofitable, so papers are largely read by (capital) city-based people. However, people can often read in their local language, so markets might actually be bigger than thought. Indeed, regional and local newspapers in Nigeria are not as profitable by comparison and of high circulations compared to State and National News papers.

We may need to talk about the radio which remains largely metropolitan phenomenon in some in Nigeria, illiterate and rural people listen to State radio stations which mainly those her broadcast in local languages. This is a simple means to reach a broader audience, and can target specific groups eg the Hausa broadcast on BBC, VOA, Local service.

Airing programmers in local languages also enables people to respond through phone-in programmes, this gives the voice less the opportunity to make a say in the bogus management of the state resources, it is an effective way of giving people the opportunity to talk about issues that affect them. These shows, which are often aired at prime times, have been facilitated by the mobile phone revolution. They offer a highly effective channel for ordinary people to debate development issues.

Because radio stations tend to provide news summaries, their coverage of poverty issues may be less in-depth than newspapers, but they reach a wider audience. In fact, radio programmes often draw their news items from the news papers, so while the newspapers and magazines tend to break the news, the radios spreads news to wider audience.

It may be easier to encourage regionally based journalists and radio stations to report on poverty issues than those based in capital cities, for various reasons:

- \* local audiences are mostly comprised of farmers and agricultural workers and development is their primary agenda; city-based audiences tend to be more interested in national politics

- \* ownership of media outlets – for example, in Nigeria local radio stations are mostly owned by the Rich Urbanites, which is commercially driven and therefore do not give considerable attention to poverty issues and focus more on playing an educative role cum business roles.

### **Paper Recommendation:**

- \* Introduce where necessary or strengthen as appropriate communication strategies to boost public awareness at all levels of policies and strategies relevant to poverty reduction. This means coordinating the involvement of all official stakeholders and non-state actors to ensure that policy design and implementation includes effective information exchange and interative public debate geared to the greater and deeper participation of poor people, in particular:

\* invite and support the independent involvement of all parts of the media – both the traditional mass media and the alternative media (such as community radio) as an integral feature of communication strategies.

Implementation of such strategies, in the context of decentralization reforms, should address the information needs of local journalists and communicators strengthen, as an integral feature of institutional reforms, the capacity of individual ministries and government departments to prepare and implement effective communication strategies, including systems to collect, collate, store and disseminate data/information relevant to poverty reduction develop stronger systems and practices to handle media relations, including agile ways of dealing with journalists' enquiries and questions, regular briefings and press conferences, electronic newsletters, and creating and updating specific pages on poverty reduction on official websites involve the media in helping to communicate the findings of official surveys and research exercises on poverty and poverty reduction, also bringing journalists into closer contact with poor people

engage the media to provide stronger coverage of key moments in official policymaking and decision-making such as national budgeting, donor loans or the development of strategies to promote economic growth and good governance.

\* Encourage the media, in the context of governance reforms, to scrutinize the quality and effectiveness of national and international decision-making on poverty reduction provide practical and political incentives for media scrutiny of official decision-making by establishing and supporting in practice effective, independent and transparent governance mechanisms, for example, audit offices and committees

\* engage the media in efforts to boost the capacity of parliaments, oversight bodies and independent public interest institutions fairly and transparently to hold all actors – national or foreign, public or private – to account for their performance and practices.

\* enable the development of independent media regulation and media support systems, in pursuit of effective public service remits, equitable licensing arrangements, stronger media financing mechanisms, and public support for high-quality public interest media content support independent media regulation institutions so that they can enhance the complementary contributions of the public, private and alternative media and promote fair competition, addressing problems posed by concentration of media markets or the challenges faced by small media actors.

\* Promote stronger recognition within the donor community of the value of a vibrant media sector in low-income countries in the global fight against poverty, through its independent contribution as a mass-reach provider of information and a forum for more inclusive public debate

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