

## MASS MEDIA AND POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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### **Abstract**

The paper has attempted a heuristic analysis of the nature of poverty situation in Nigeria by highlighting how mass media can be deployed to sustain the public awareness, debate and participation needed to help enhance public engagement in poverty reduction strategies. The media's potential in engendering the Poverty Reduction Strategies has been acknowledged for two main reasons. First, they serve as vehicles for sharing information in order to facilitate good governance, generate opportunities to gain access to essential services and promote accountability by elected officials. Secondly, they are associated with a range of benefits that are highly relevant to the challenges of poverty eradication. Realizing these potentials of the mass media is however not enough, the key issue is how to make the mass media fulfil these potentials in Nigeria, as is already the case in many developed countries.

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of mass media in poverty reduction strategies cannot be overemphasized. Although the primary responsibilities of the media (print and broadcast) is to entertain without slander or libel, inform based on accurate facts and educate on current relevant issues. Apart from these roles, developmental scholars and professionals have been widely recognized the potential of mass media in relation to poverty eradication (Panos, 2007). By informing the public and highlighting the vital issues and policy decisions at stake, the media plays a vital role in sustaining the public awareness, debate and participation needed to help enhance public engagement in Poverty Reduction Strategies and spur into action those with the power to make a difference in the society (Saliu, 2006; Dunu and Uzochukwu, 2009).

Since the world government leaders made a pledge to their citizens for the reduction of extreme poverty in 2000, poverty has become a significant concern for publics globally. A 2005 international opinion poll in 68 countries, for example revealed that poverty is the most pressing humanitarian issue of our time. Poverty is also increasingly recognized as not being only about lack of income, but also about lack of health, education and the inability to participate in society among other variables (Wikipedia, 2009; Fofack, 2008; Ezeah, 2009). As the mid-point for achieving the MDGs by 2015 is reached with significant progress in serious doubts in most African countries, the time has come for all policy actors to recognize and support the potentially crucial contribution of the mass media to efforts to reduce poverty in developing countries. However, it had argued that the potential of the media to act as a catalyst in Nigeria in Poverty Reduction Strategies has so far not been adequately realized. It is in this context that this paper explores how the media could strengthen coverage of poverty reduction issues in Nigeria. This paper also analyses the barriers and constraints that hinder the extent to which the media can meet this challenge and highlight the opportunities to engage and support stronger media coverage.

## CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

To enhance the understanding and appreciation of this study, it is necessary to put the discourse into a conceptual context to provide a framework for analysis. Thus, we can proceed to explain the nuances the issue of mass media and poverty.

### Mass Media

The media can be defined as the totality of organizations and agencies that provide information for the members of the public. Otherwise known as mass media, it is described as “the art of transmitting ideas, opinions, words and attitudes from one person or some persons to the masses” (Akinfaloje, 1988). The media are made up of the press, people who write reports for public consumption and such profession is called journalism. The media comprise five chief fields which are newspaper, news service, magazines, radio and television, which all thrive on news (Mahfouz, 2005).

Okunna (2004) observes the mass media are powerful tools for the construction of social reality. This is the ability of the media to determine the way people and issues are perceived in a society. This ability derives mainly from the fact that in this information age, the media provide an overwhelming percentage of the information and ideas that human beings require to make sense of the world. It is important to point out that within the mainstream media there have been contentions concerning the power of the media to contribute to a social challenge such as poverty reduction. Indeed some medial scholars believe that the media has no mandate or obligation to change the way in which society is run, rather the role of the media lies in the area of information dissemination, explanation and exploration of issues, provoking discussion and debate and facilitating an exchange of opinion.

The idea of agenda setting posits that the priorities of the media, invariably and to some degrees become the priorities of the public. What the media emphasizes is in turn emphasized by the audience of the media. (Abidi, 1978; Mura, 1987). The mass media can, beyond their primary function of informing, educating and entertaining the public set the guidelines for labour certain issues or events by laying emphasis on them. (Madubike, 1999). It can then be averred that part of the functions of the media is to lend importance to certain issues, they build a hierarchy of social realities by presenting them in order of importance. The public learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. It would then seem that the most important function of the mass media is its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us.

### Poverty

Poverty is a most conveniently expressed as a shortfall in consumption (or income) from some poverty line. The most commonly used poverty line is an income of US \$1 per day.

However, this statistics does not adequately convey the full impact or implication of poverty. According to Wikipedia (2009), poverty is a shortage of such necessities as food, clothing, Shelter and safe drinking water, all of which determine man's quality of life. It may also include the lack of access to opportunities such as education and employment which aid the escape from poverty and/or allow one to enjoy the respect of fellow citizens. In addition to being unable to buy necessities of life, poverty affects a person's freedom to live a valued life and undertake critically important functions. Poverty excludes individuals and groups wholly or particularly from full participation in the societies in which they live (IFAD, 2001). In the United States according to Wikipedia (2009) "to be poor is to be deprived of those goods and services and pleasures which others around us take for granted".

Poverty is usually measured as either absolute or relative terms (the latter being actually an index of income inequality). Relative poverty views poverty as socially defined and dependent on social context. Absolute poverty refers to a set standard which is consistent over time and between countries. An example of an absolute poverty measurement is the percentage of a population eating less food than is required to sustain the human body (approximately 2000-2500 calories per day for an adult) Wikipedia, 2009).

The World Bank (2006) defines extreme poverty as living on less than US \$1 per day, and moderate poverty as less than \$2 per day, estimating that "in 2001, 1.1 billion people had consumption levels below \$1 a day and 2.7 billion lived on less than \$2 a day".

## **POVERTY SITUATION IN NIGERIA**

Generally, the poverty level in Nigeria has been extremely high with about two-thirds of the population living below the poverty line in 1996. Specifically, poverty level went up to 50% between 1980 and 1985 from 28.1% to 46.3%. Between 1982 and 1992, there was a drop of about 4 percentage. However, by 1996 the level jumped up to 65.6%, an increase of more than 50% of 1993 figures. In absolute figures, however, the population in poverty continued to rise over the 16-year period. The estimated number of the poor, therefore, rose from 18 million in 1980 to 35 million in 1985, 39 million in 1992 and 67 million in 1996 (Ijaiya and Mobolaji, 2004).

Between 1980 and 1996, the rate of poverty was at a higher level in the rural areas than in the urban areas. In 1980, the poverty level was 29.3%, it went up to 51.4% in 1985 and in 1992, the figure came down to 46.1% whereas in 1996, the rural population in poverty increased to 69%. In respect of urban areas, poverty levels were 17.6% in 1980, 37.8% in 1985, 37.5% in 1992 and 55.5% in 1996 (FOS, 1996; Ijaiya and Mobolaji, 2004).

Specifically, these situation trends are manifested in a steady decline in total factor productivity, and decline in real average family income in the rural and urban areas. The decline in GDP at factor cost in 1987 prices was at an average annual rate of 1.8% between 1981 and 1985 with a slight increase by only 2.28% in 1992, 2.28% in 1993 and 1.3%, 2.21%, and 3.25% in 1994, 1995 and 1996 respectively. These also had their toll on the level of poverty in the country. Stagnation in agricultural and industrial production, increase in the rate of unemployment, decline in per capita consumption by 1%, increase in the rate of inflation from 45% in 1992 to about 73% in 1994 are some of the indicators in poverty (FOS, 1999).

The poor in Nigeria are also confronted with lack of adequate housing, poor housing conditions, unsafe and degraded environment, social and political discriminations and exclusion, increase in child labour and abuse. The poor also lack assets as well as income in local economies in which wealth and status are from the land. Disadvantaged households are typically land poor or landless. Thus, a relation exists between poverty and landlessness. Even when the poor do own land, it is often unproductive and they are usually unable to improve such plots since they lack income and access to direct facilities.

Malnutrition, illness, limited access to health care services, limited access to safe water and good roads are also indicators of poverty in the rural areas of Nigeria. Because of malnutrition, for instance, in 1995, 37.8% of all children under 5 years of age had stunted growth, 9.2% of the children suffered from overweight while 19.8% were under-weight.

In respect of road network only 15% of the rural population lives in communities that can be accessed by a paved road. In 35% of the communities, the access roads are not paved but can be used during the rainy season. Half of the people live in communities where the access route is not paved and cannot be used during rainy season.

The Federal Office of Statistics (FOS, 2006), estimated that in 2001 poverty incidence in the country has reached 66 percent in statistical terms, this means that 76.6 million Nigerian's out of

the then population of 110 million were poor. With an estimation of 150 million today, about 80 million Nigerians or two-thirds of the population are poor. According to (FOS, 2006), "poverty permeates virtually all ramifications of Nigeria's national life". In 2003, Nigeria ranked among the ten countries which have the greatest numbers of people without access to safe water. The World Bank Report (2003) stated emphatically that the cash income of the poor in Nigeria "is insufficient to cover minimum standards of food, water, shelter, medicare and schooling.

### **MASS MEDIA AND ITS CHALLENGES IN POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES**

The media which is the basic source of information to all and sundry could be categorized into two i.e. the print media which include newspapers, magazines and periodicals, and the broadcast, comprising primarily of the radio, television, satellite, cinematography etc. these various media of communication have been widely accepted as efficient means of sending messages across to a large audience, however, scattered they are across space.

It must be borne in mind that the need and power of mass media could not be underrated. They give information which is most needed by the society. As society progresses, socially, economically and politically, the need for more information increase and thus, for the mass media. According to McQuail, (1990) "Mass media, Radio, Television, Newspapers and Magazines, because of the systematic character of their message and their consistency over time have powerful effects on the society. Mass media has also been described as a moulder of society.

The broadcast media especially, has the power of reaching millions of people at the same time. The publics, with the invention of satellites, have the benefit of viewing the world right in their homes and subsequently increasing the educational opportunity for those intellectually disadvantaged. They (the media) are capable of providing the public with information as instantly as possible. Live programmes are disseminated to the masses just as at the time the event is taking place. It is note-worthy that the speed with which information is gathered and disseminate in mass media (electronic especially) is incomparable to any other means of communication. This in turn places a very high influence on the receivers' psychology. This is because when the audience is provided with fresh and undistorted information, the effect on them is usually spontaneous. Rivers, (1980) has said: "the mass media is the potent mass dissemination of culture and information that the world posses and.... The objective of bringing

it to Nigeria is to assist in the development of the country in every possible way and in orderly fashion...”

From the foregoing, it becomes apparent that the media definitely has the potential to play an effective role in ensuring success of poverty eradication strategies. Some of these roles are explained below:

**1. Monitoring:** One cardinal function of the media is its watchdog function. In a democracy, the monitoring role is largely shared, even though the media plays the most significance, part being the main channel for exchanging information among various groups. The media through investigative and in-depth reporting and coverage can help hold state and national policy makers to account for their actions and inactions in relation to Poverty Reduction Strategies and implementations. In Nigeria, the media has been upheld for their role in political monitoring in the sense of reporting and opposing the atrocities of the prevailing bad leadership (Jason, 1971; Saliu, 2006).

The media was the major established institution that checkmated the abuse of state powers. In the present scheme of things the media should equally play a proactive, role in scrutinizing various government actions on poverty reduction and their impact on the society. Although successive governments in Nigeria have announced one poverty reduction initiative or the other, hardly have most of them gone beyond the rhetoric. For instance, we will recall the Babangida Administrations “Better Life for Rural Women Scheme, Abacha’s Family Support Programme and Obasanjo administration poverty alleviation programmes”. Most analysis believe that these are populist gimmicks rather than serious attempts to mitigate poverty among the populace. Even the poverty alleviation programme has been faulted because it devotes far too little financial resources to the cause that can have any meaningful impact on the poor. The media therefore should be more active in monitoring economic reform and poverty programme with the hope of ensuring a better design and implementation process for present and future initiatives (Duru and Uzochukwu, 2009).

**2. Communication:** The foremost function of the media is the ability to serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of information and enabling access to information. This crucial duty of the media helps citizen to participate more fully in governance. By supplying the people with the quantity and quality of information needed the media enables the public to make well-informed

decisions on critical issues such as poverty reduction. Thus it is possible for the media to inform people on the vital news and analysis of significant development in the overall strategies and specific programmes and initiatives to combat poverty in Nigeria. Unfortunately, media's role in this regard has been relatively peripheral. Media coverage of issues relevant to poverty reduction, even when it may have been increasing in quantity in some countries, often lacks analytical depth and human focus.

**3. Providing platform for public debate:** As noted by several schools of thought, the mass media are the chief mediators of political reality, the main source of political and economic intelligence and significant influencers of public opinion. As such the media could help set the agenda in public discourses and provoke debate on poverty related issues. In relation to the issue of poverty, the media needs to create more platforms for public debate and discussion of policies, strategies and mechanics involved in poverty reduction. This will not only sensitize the public but would mobilize and motivate them into action. However the level of such sensitization effort by the media in Nigeria for instance is appallingly low (Obiagbena, 2001). The media though not a political or development actor could motivate political and development agencies into action.

**4. Reflection to Diverse Views:** The media most political and social function is the potential for empowerment. It is this that offers one of the greatest and far-reaching tool for eradicating poverty. The media by providing an open forum to reflect divergent public views and voices empower the public to participate in shaping decisions that affect the issue of poverty reduction. Development scholars and professionals have identified participation as a core principle in the Poverty Reduction Strategies which could ensure its success. As such media efforts that would report and cover poor peoples views, experiences and challenges they face and the solution they feel are needed to reduce poverty will be an invaluable factor in combating poverty. In reality, however, the knowledge and experiences of people living in poverty in Nigeria are often under reported, misunderstood, undervalued and their perspective on their needs and on solution to their own problems ignored. Gitua (2006) has given solid support to view that;

*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. (22).*



Inclusion of broad public views on the issues of poverty by the media would also help policy actors in formulating effective policies on Poverty Reduction Strategies and identifying areas for further interventions.

Despite the above roles of the mass media in poverty reduction strategies, there are inter-related challenges and constraints that hinder the ability of the media to perform these public service functions as effectively as required. In this direction, the World Bank (2005) argues that the effectiveness of the media contribution in Nigeria to the Poverty Reduction Strategies depends as whether there is a free, independent and plural media system, determined by:

- An appropriate legal and regulatory environment
- The extent to which it can penetrate all sections of the public and political communities.
- Whether the media can produce informed, insightful and engaging reports and analysis.

Apart from the above, changing media environment is another challenge. The liberalization of the media in Nigeria has led to an increased competition for limited audiences in order to survive or expand. This situation seems to have given rise to extreme commercialization in the media. It has exerted pressure towards the coverage of more conventional topics that will attract sponsorships creating problems for the coverage of poverty reduction issues. In Nigeria for example the rapid influx of private media companies, has intensified the competition for audiences, motivating the media to report only the stories which are most attractive from a business point of view. This changing media markets has also significantly shifted media focus from human interest issues to political and business personalities – often forfeiting the quality and range of reporting in order to amass audience members. A scrutiny of the major News of most Television and Radio stations in Nigeria is a testimony to this as more than two thirds of the news bulletin are devoted to business and financial institution which are referred to as commercial news stories. In this climate of extreme commercial competition poverty is often not considered newsworthy (Oso, 1997; Gitua, 2006).

Financial constraints serve as another challenge. In most media houses in Nigeria especially the print media have been left financially depressed by the long period of military dictatorship that ensured repression of the press, that they can now hardly meet their cost of production. The

low revenue implies little or no resources to invest in socio-economic inquiry. Another related development to this is that have lost staff with training in economics, finance and other commercial disciplines to those sectors of the economy where the pay is now much higher. In depth reporting that covers a wider range of issues and viewpoints, including those of poor people, involves greater research and travel costs which most media houses cannot afford. Related to this is the fact that many media institutions are often urban based and as such their reporters cover stories in the cities, while the most pressing and interesting poverty related stories may be in rural areas. Generally a lack of financial resources has been identified as a key constraint to stronger reporting and coverage of poverty reduction and related issues.

Inadequate expertise in many media houses that are unable to catch up with high pace of development in technology is another constraint. They are not sufficiently equipped to play the desired oversight role in the design and monitoring of economic and poverty reduction programmes. Panos (2007) study in Zambia shows that 79 percent of journalists did not possess a solid background in economic and business reporting, which 21 percent have only attended short post qualification courses. The case of Zambia is also tenable in Nigeria. The result in this is lack of analytical and interpretative skills needed to understand the mainstream economic views and trends in order to interpret and present them to the public. Moreover editors and reporters need to engage in training in order to develop thematic knowledge and critical skills to cover poverty-related issues more effectively. This lack of specific training and background in economics and social issues impairs their ability to understand and cover complex issues even those relating to core topics of interest to the media.

Ownership is another militating factor since government in Nigeria is the highest shareholder of the media institution key exerts tremendous influence in media coverage of issues. It is not an uncommon thing for the government or politician to censor coverage of stories that could show them in a bad light or threaten their particular interest. Most public media in this wake of democracy in Nigeria are used by government as a means of spreading their own propaganda and agenda. Existence of the official secrets acts in Nigeria is still a source of restraint for the journalist. For example, the freedom of information bill has not been passed, thereby imposing limits on what the media can cover. This raises the question about the media's capacity to perform a public interest function on poverty reduction. Moreover, politicians and bureaucrats

have also been known to torture journalists in Nigeria who expose failed development projects and government maladministration (Daily Independent, 2006). Similarly, governments are in principle the power holders and generators of information and analysis on poverty reduction issues. However, strategies for disseminating such valuable information are often inadequate. Such official communication problems directly affect the media as a gate-keeper of information and as a key civil society interface with the public. Government provision of information to the media about Poverty Reduction Strategies process has in many cases been poor and sporadic and as such it is not a surprise that majority of the journalist in Nigeria would not know what Poverty Reduction Strategies are (Sadler, 2004).

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

For the media to stimulate the informed inclusive public debates which could make a distinct contribution to poverty reduction efforts there is need for the media, civil society and government to pay greater attention to the challenge of developing the stronger knowledge, critical skills, and information gathering skills needed to make poverty the story in Nigerian media. To this end there is need for collaboration and support of the civil society and government with the media. For the media in Nigeria to strengthen its coverage of poverty reduction issues there is also need for policy actors to recognize and support the ability of relevant parts of the media, in principle to play such critical independent roles as already discussed. For the media, the need to be professionally guided, ethically responsible and responsive to public opinion and development becomes imperative.

Importantly, there is need for the media to look for ways in which possible poverty reduction stories can be integrated into the core 'beats' of journalism such as politics, business and economics, governance, corruption, and crime. In support of this, Nigerian government needs to recognize and support the vitally important role that alternative media such as community radio and community theatre can play to amplify poor people's voices and scale up their impact.

Above all, the government should give the media some degree of autonomy to enable them function more effectively especially in poverty reduction strategies.

The above and others, if complied with will surely lift the media practise and the nation at large to a greater height.

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