ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mass Media Role in Improving the Living Standards of Rural Dwellers in Nigeria

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Abstract

The essence of development is a rise in the level and quality of life of the population, creation of employment opportunities, and alleviating poverty. In many ways the mass media plays a sacrosanct role in sustainable development. Rural development is a daunting challenge to Nigerian Government and other countries in Africa. The several development programmes embarked upon by successive governments in Nigeria has not yielded the desired impacts on the lives of the rural population. A recent media report has it that 91.6% of Nigerians are living in extreme poverty and this poses a great danger. The mass media with its role in social responsibility and as watchdog of society has a strong role to play in helping government to actualize its developmental goals. The paper using content analysis as its research methodology and being hinged on development media theory calls for media intervention in the development process of the rural communities in Nigeria with a view to improving the living standards. The findings reveal that most economic, transformational and poverty alleviating programmes can be brought to limelight by the mass media with development implications for the rural population. In conclusion, the role the mass media play in sustaining the development of the Nigerian rural dwellers cannot be overemphasized as it is the nexus and collaboration that is needed to improve the living standards of the rural people.

Keywords: Rural Development, Mass Media, Development Journalism, Poverty Alleviation, Living Standards.

Introduction

The strategic role of the mass media in achieving national development in any society is not in doubt. The Nigeria media overtime has consistently been on the vanguard of championing the cause for development in the country. The foremost priorities of most economies especially the developing nations is the formulation of strategies with which to effectively implement sustainable national development policies. The Nigerian constitution has implicit and sacrosanct responsibilities bestowed on the mass media. This is enshrined in Section 22 of the 1999 Nigeria Constitution. By this provision, the mass media is expected to join hands with the government to promote programmes and policies that will improve the living standards of the citizens.

Nwabueze (2011, p.15) sees development as not basically targeted at achieving only economic or infrastructural goals but as a change process that seeks to better the life and environment of man largely through his own efforts and at his own pace. The essence of development is a rise in the level and quality of life of the population, creation of employment opportunities and alleviating poverty. It is critical and essential to the sustenance and growth of any nation. Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011), collaborating the earlier stated view, explain that a country is classified as developed when it is able to provide qualitative life for her citizenry.

The Nigeria government has evolved developmental programmes and policies for the rural people which has suffered poor execution. Popular among these policies include National Accelerated Agricultural Food Production Programme (NAFPP), Green Revolution, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), War Against Indiscipline (WAI), Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructural (DFRRI), Better Life for Rural Women, N-Power among others.

However, the rural people were not carried along as it is a two-way process. The media and the

rural people engage in this collaboration in order to make a success in national development. The media serves the nation and especially focus on the sensitive and critical issues that matter to the greater population which are the rural populace. Mabogunde (1981) in Agbanu and Nwabueze (2011, p.16) confirms that rural development is the most effective means of improving the well being of the vast majority of a country's population.

Rural well being can only be improved upon with result-oriented strategies that will influence, convince and engage the realities in developing themselves and their environment. The mass media as agencies of policies readily plays its role as purveyor of society and through its development-oriented programmes, enlightenment, community relations, media campaigns and other ancillary activities becomes the nexus that is needed to bring rural development programmes to the limelight and assist in improving the living standards of the rural people in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The several development programmes embarked upon by successive governments in Nigeria has not yielded the desired impacts on the lives of the rural population. It is more worrisome when such policies are termed rural development oriented, being targeted at impacting the rural dwellers. A recent media report has it that 91.6% of Nigerians are living in extreme poverty with over 60% of them in the rural areas. These persons are not properly informed and have no access to media strategic programme that is rural community oriented.

Objectives of Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1) To identify the role of mass media in improving the living standards of the rural dwellers in Nigeria.
2) To examine the challenges facing the mass media in performing their sustainable rural development roles in Nigeria.
3) To facilitate rural development and poverty reduction through appropriate media strategies.

Methodology

This research adopted the content analysis methodology. It studied communication contents and rural development works. The study employed the use of secondary data drawn extensively from already available documented works from textbooks, magazines and journals. This is a library research which critically evaluates extant literature on related works on the topic.

Concept of Poverty and the Rural People

Rural area refers to areas in a country that are not fully developed. It conjures the image of backwardness, darkness and high traditional or near primitive life styles. According to Udoakah (1998, p.49) cited in Asemah, Edegoh and Anum (2003, p.12), rural people centre on acute underdevelopment and poverty and they manifest themselves in the form of bad roads, lack of water supply, poor housing, poor sanitation and high illiteracy.

Poverty is seen as deprivation. This implies deprivation in material consumption, health, education, social life, environmental quality, unemployment, spiritual and political freedom (Akpan in Mboho & Batta, 2012, p.209). This level of life style which depicts poverty is prevalent in the rural communities of Nigeria inspite of the introduction of development policies and programmes.

World Bank Report 2011 defines poverty as the inability to attain a standard of living. The report categorizes a nation as poverty prone when there are no transformational or developmental policies in the economy for enhanced growth and job creation in order to support the delivery of social services to the people of that country regardless of their geographical location or social and economic circumstances.

Lack of involvement of the rural communities is largely an outcome of the failure of communities in communication that borders on rural development. Therefore, the multi-dimensional and hydra-headed nature of poverty in Nigeria demands a media community dialogue to address

their poverty concern with a view to finding sustainable development and improving the living standards of the rural people.

A clearer picture and striking feature of the rural area is the lack of clean water, which causes diseases. Another feature is traditional life style with a lot of superstitious beliefs which hinder them from accepting changes or modernization which the mass media disseminates. Agbodike (2013) describes the state of the rural communities to be depression, hunger, poverty, deprivation and degradation. Some other indices of these rural areas include lack of basic educational facilities, and high birth rate leading to population growth which is so high that the rural people are enmeshed in poverty and unable to raise their standard of living except with government assistance.

The life of the rural people can be described as hard, rustic, barbaric and sometimes dependent. According to Bessong and Ogong (2019, p.724), the rural areas in Nigeria are typically poverty stricken, malnourished, and in poor health condition with short life span and absolute denial of basic infrastructure when compared with the urban areas.

Rural Development

The concept of development is multifaceted. Economic development is from the economic view point that is usually associated with increase in a country's Gross National Product (GNDP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This was the benchmark for considering the developed, underdeveloped or rural economy. The notion has moved from this myopic growth oriented paradigm.

Anibueze (2005) as cited in Barikui (2007) posits that development in human society starts from the individual level, which implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. The achievement of any of these aspects of development in the state of the rural populace is referred to as Rural Development.

Development in the rural context refers to all efforts and activities that involve the people at the grassroots to improve their living standards. It is development of the people by the people and for the people. Rural development involves changes and transformation to harness human potential which can result in improvements in living standards of the rural people. Rural development is a massive and multi-pronged effort that seeks to boost production, but also creates and spreads employment and roots out the fundamental causes of poverty, illiteracy and disease. According to Soola (2002, p.15) rural development must permeate the entire spectrum and strata of society, touching on the lives of the poorest of the poor, lifting them up, as it were from the abyss of poverty, ignorance, disease, squalor, human rights abuse and similar deprivations.

Government at various strata in Nigeria has been perpetuating poor performance in rural development. The worst hits are the oil producing communities where oil is drilled to develop the urban centres in Nigeria. These rural communities of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria suffer government neglect and a large part of their agricultural produce has been destroyed by oil spillage and water has been polluted, depriving them of their livelihood and subjecting them to abject poverty.

Development Media Theory

The call for media intervention in the development process is hinged on Denis McQuail theory coined as Development Media Theory. The theory is quite pivotal as it sees the mass media as influential for national development in developing countries. According to McQuail (2000), the central thesis of the theory is that the media in developing nations should be used for the primacy of national development task which includes economic, social, cultural and political sphere.

Primarily, the theory is rooted in the functionalist paradigm of mass media's role in development. It presupposes the use of mass media in achieving development issues in developing countries. In view of the fact that the four theories

of the press (Authoritarian, Libertarian, Soviet/ Communist and Social Responsibility) are inadequate to explain the media systems of the developing nations, the need for another theory becomes essential. Thus, the need to propound the development media theory was to take care of how the media can aid the development of those nations. The assumption is that the mass media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm are part of the instruments for achieving development in developing nation, particularly Africa.

The Development media theory was developed by the Third World Countries to explain the concept of development journalism (Kur, 2000). The theory as conceptualized by Kwame Nkwrumah in the 1960s saw the media as a revolutionary tool of African liberation from the fetters of colonialism, imperialism, poverty and all its negative allies. Indeed the mass media was considered a virile and significant extension of government and its programmes toward socio-economic and cultural development.

Development media theory embraces the reportage of all shades of views including natural disasters, poverty, diseases, and environmental deprivation. The essence was to learn from the pitfalls, correct human errors and inefficiency while charting a new course towards development.

McQuail (1987) outlines six man postulates of the development theory as follows;

i. Media should accept and carry out positive developments tasks in line with nationally established policy.
ii. Freedom of the media should be open to restriction according to economic priorities and development needs of society.
iii. Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language.
iv. Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries which are close geographically, culturally or politically.

The relevance of the developmental media theory to this work is the realization that the mass media plays a herculean task in drawing media attention and media intervention in the development process of the rural communities in Nigeria and improving their living standards too.

Mass Media for Development

Sustainable Development cover a wide range of areas in life like health, housing and governance. The media therefore has a strategic role to play in realizing these issues in the environment. The media is vested with the responsibility to create awareness about issues that could negatively affect the people within the rural community. The media is a virile instrument to promote sustainable development issues in Nigeria.

Mass media for development is a development strategy (Akpan, 2012, p.211) that uses communication techniques, activities and media to guide and make people experience and sustain positive change within their communities. This suggests that it is participatory oriented. It engages the community people on communication for development in community specific challenges.

Mass media content for development respect local values and cultures, and facilitates participatory processes to address ills and negative components in their domain. It also targets the actual beneficiaries of a development package and engages the key stakeholders, people of influence, and ensures public support to bring about the desired changes in behavior and sustained practice over time.

The mass media for development uses the following: (a) Dialogue (b) Participation (c) Knowledge sharing and (d) Information to establish public support for a development programme and empower communities to make informed decisions and action about improving their social and living standard. Community dialogue, which is a bottom-up approach that centres on and emerges from the communities themselves, enables the people to appreciate their problems and design appropriate solution. This approach addresses the issue of social exclusion in the development process. Community dialogue is

an integral part of community media participation which Desa (2008, p.115) observes is an indispensible part of many projects encouraged by national governments.

The media for development should encourage templates for strategic involvement as follows:

1939 Design programmes to educate the people about the concept of development.

1940 Use local and community language and relevant media to depict the dangers in health, drugs, environmental matters and how to avoid them.

1941 Produce series of jingles, montages, write-ups promoting gender equality by encouraging the girl child to go to school.

1942 Do commercial spots on government development projects to reflect transparency, integrity and accountability.

1943 The media should organize a forum to bring together major stakeholders in the society to address the problem of human rights violation especially the abuse of innocent children and the molestation of widows.

1944 The media in collaboration with agencies such as the Road Safety organization, Ministry of Health can produce programmes on the conditions of the roads and the health facilities so as to draw the attention of government.

In the World today, the mass media is considered to be an integral aspect of society because the media is assumed to possess potential for significant influence in all ramifications of a given society like Nigeria. The mass media must foster developmental agenda to provide solution to societal issues that might lead to the developmental heights of any nation. This it has to do in order to play its role as the fourth estate of the realm with utmost fairness and objectivity.

Ekeanyanwu (2007) believes that the media is a sure way of helping improve the wellbeing of the citizenry as it keeps in touch with the people and the contemporary world, adding that communication is a vital component of our lives and existence and no society has been known to exist without the mass media. The appropriate use of the mass media can better the lot of the people or further enslave and impoverish them.

Findings

From the extensive review, the research made the following findings:

a) That the mass media in Nigeria are yet to be effectively decentralized and democratized.

b) That mass media is still heterophilious in nature as most media contents are urban based and do not reflect the background of the realities.

c) Information is still vertical and from top to bottom, giving the rural listeners little or no room to make input in what affects them.

d) Non inclusion of the rural people in message and content formulation as it affects rural development.

e) Mass media practitioners' rights are not guaranteed by the state.

f) The existence of unconducive and threatening environment that negates sustainable rural development. For example, Herdsmen, Boko Haram, Insurgency, etc.

g) Lack of remuneration, equipment and media training in development communication.

h) Existence of obnoxious laws.

i) Mass media restriction from having access to information that tends to develop society.

Conclusion

The challenge of improving the living standards of the rural people is enormous. Nwagbara (2010) is of the opinion that the coalescence of effective media and the public sphere is a synergy that brings about developmental objectives and improvement of the lives of the citizenry. It can be said to be a bastion of people agitation for good governance, poverty alleviation and development. This is because the mass media has become a place where individuals meet to address societal and economic

questions with the respective government in power.

The mass media as in advanced societies should serve as a means of educating the public and serving as a tool for promoting sustainable development, improving the lot of the rural people and good governance. As such, the mass media should give serious attention to grassroots and rural development reporting so that people in the grassroots who are the most vulnerable to crisis, economic hardship, social isolation, displacements, homelessness, poor infrastructure among others can be carried along as they gain confidence of the government.

Recommendations

Media is crucial and occupies a central place in rural development. This is so because mass media facilitates the dissemination of information on issues that concern the rural people. However, it is important to note that rural media communication on development issues has not been accorded the pride of place. This work recommends as follows:

- The mass media and development experts should ensure the participation of rural people in development programmes as the well as the participatory relevance of improving the living standards of the rural communities.
- Government at various levels and the private sector should provide adequate infrastructural facilities to enable the full take off of community media.
- The educational content potential of the mass media should be used to integrate and mobilize the rural people to acquire knowledge, attitudes and adopt behaviours that may improve the living standards of the rural dwellers.
- Both government and private sector should establish viable community mass media organizations in the rural areas.
- The government should adopt a mass media integration plan for the rural areas and a means of eradicating poverty.
- There should be more mass media research on rural development and poverty eradication among scholars.

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