

Press Freedom and the Imperatives of Democracy: Towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors argue that press freedom is a key element of democracy. They, however, contend that for the press to serve its meaningful role towards a country's sustainable development, it must be transparent, accountable and responsible. The authors draw extensively from research findings in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, which to them are adequately representative of the entire Sub-Saharan Africa region. The paper discusses at length some factors which affect sustainable development, as well as the performance of the press in the two countries. The conclusions made are that the press systems in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone are neither democratic nor do they serve the cause of ensuring sustainable development. A major weakness, the authors maintain, is the fact that the press in the two countries pay more attention to the outside world than to issues affecting their predominantly illiterate population.

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La Liberté de la Presse et les Exigences de la Démocratie vers un Développement Durable

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Résumé

Dans cet exposé, l'argument de base est que la liberté de la presse est un élément crucial dans la formation de la démocratie. Cependant, les auteurs nous avertissent que le développement soutenable d'un pays va de pair avec la transparence et la responsabilité. Les conclusions se basent sur les données recueillies au Nigéria et au Sierra Leone, qui sont pris comme modèles représentatifs de l'Afrique Sub-Saharienne. On discute largement les facteurs qui influencent le développement soutenable, et la performance de la presse dans ces pays. La conclusion tirée est que les systèmes de presse au Nigéria et au Sierra Leone n'assurent pas un développement soutenable, et qu'ils ne sont pas démocratiques. La faiblesse de ces systèmes est qu'ils se conforment plus facilement aux pressions du monde extérieur qu'aux aspects qui régissent la vie d'une population largement illettrée.

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Introduction

As African countries strive to create what they perceive to be sustainable development, press freedom and the broader issue of democratization of communication have become primary concerns to all who express interest in creating such a society. By sustainable development we mean the empowerment of people to seek not only their own self-improvement but also the improvement of future generations. From this perspective, communication is related to sustainable development through the following:

1. Appropriate and enduring democratization. By democratization we do not refer to participative dispensations within a pre-specified politico-economic ideology such as capitalism or socialism. We refer, instead, to participation by the majority of people in information acquisition and distribution whether it is within a national politico-economic ideology of capitalism or socialism.
2. Stable and enduring media policies. Such policies must include a free press within the framework of development. Some guidelines were advocated by Aggarwala (1979), Ogan (1982), McQuail (1987), and Ansah (1988). These guidelines espouse media systems which are "opposed to dependency and foreign domination and to arbitrary authoritarianism. They are for positive uses of the media in national development, for the autonomy and cultural identity of the particular national society. To a certain extent they favor democratic, grass-roots involvement, and thus participative communication models" (McQuail, 1987, p. 131).
3. Appropriate training of media practitioners. That is, culturally sensitive and appropriate development communication training as postulated by scholars such as Chimutengwende (1988) and Mohammed (1995). Mohammed noted that development communication is presently taught with foreign texts and by 'Africanists' who

lack proper understanding of African societies.

4. Equitable allocation of communication resources and services with substantial benefits aimed at rural populations that are generally excluded from the dynamics of modern communication. Adesonaye (1990) estimates that as many as 80 per cent of Nigerians are excluded from the mass media because these Nigerians are not part of the urban-elite. M'Bayo (1991) arrives at similar conclusions in a study of communication policies in Sierra Leone.

This paper, focuses on the issues of a free and democratic press as an "engine" and as a catalyst for sustainable development.

In Africa, particularly in countries that must move from military dictatorships to democratic governance, the task of achieving a free and democratic press for sustainable development is enormous. Such tasks involve a rethinking of the social, economic, and political relations existing among citizens of these countries. This rethinking, based on an old premise, suggests "a logical connection between democracy in society and democracy in communication" and espouses the view that in order for the collective voice of the people to be heard and sustainable development achieved, the spirit of democracy should be brought also to the world of communication (MacBride et al, 1980, p. 166).

We begin our discussion with the process of moving towards sustainable development with an overview of factors that affect sustainable development in emerging African democracies. In addition, we will evaluate media performance and identify expected media roles within the framework of sustainable development in such democracies, with primary focus on Nigeria and Sierra Leone. We have selected these two countries, as Koroma did in 1987, because they appear to adequately represent conditions on both sides of the Sub Saharan African spectrum — the endowed and the unendowed. Nigeria has a viable economy regarded as wealthy and rich in natural resources in comparison to other African countries such as Sierra

Leone which is one of the weakest in Africa. Nigeria is heavily populated while Sierra Leone is one of the small countries in terms of population. Both countries are presently under military rule with a promise for future democratization. The above reasons provide adequate support for our contention that conditions in Sub Saharan African countries are represented by examples from these two countries.

Factors Affecting Sustainable Development

There are specific national characteristics which communication practitioners, policy makers and development scholars should take into consideration in formulating policies toward sustainable development. These considerations can be found at both the social and media levels.

Social Factors

There are several factors at the social level that greatly influence and define the behavior of communication and information systems in a society. Some of the most critical factors are (a) population and economic status, (b) language and culture, (c) education, (d) laws and regulations.

Population and Economic Status

The major concern here is how the population is distributed amongst the urban and rural areas, the rate of population growth, the living standards, national wealth, etc. These issues affect media reach or circulation, as well as economic or financial ability to access the media. Population has been linked to sustainable development since several population issues such as mortality rates and life expectancy are indicators of development (Obeng-Quaidoo and Gikonyo, 1995 and Tawiah, 1995). A much more subtle issue of population, however, is its distribution nationally and its relationships with media access.

Language and Culture

Language, particularly, has been critical in mass mobilization and education which are imperatives for development. In most African countries, the language groups are so numerous that a mass media message crafted in one language is usually unable to reach a significant percentage of the population.

In most Anglophone African countries, several languages are spoken including English which is designated as the official language of each country. The different dialects and the regions in which they are spoken display elements of culture that are unique to their immediate environments. Because of this, and as it is the case generally in culturally plural societies, such countries can be said to be not only multi-lingual societies, but also to have several sub cultures.

Education

This is one of the major factors in achieving sustainable development and has been acknowledged as a key role of the press especially in the developing world (McQuail, 1987). Using education to achieve sustainable development is possible through creating public awareness, knowledge, and conviction of how to achieve a sustainable condition. The task is undaunting if conditions such as mass illiteracy exist or if educators do not take into consideration the values of the recipients.

Laws and Regulations

As we indicated earlier, press freedom and democracy are critical to sustainable development because the former engenders a high level of participation of the citizenry. However, there is no country in the world, including the United States, that is devoid of forms of regulations which directly or indirectly affect the way journalists do their work. Some of these laws may be designed not only to protect press freedom but also to protect the rights

of others as well as the public good. Freedom becomes restricted only when press laws are applied in ways that reflect the mood and temperament of the government in power rather than the objective conditions of the society.

Media Factors

One of the major concerns of communication scholars and media sociologists who study the performance of the media in society deals with how the content of mass media is shaped. As we indicated in the previous section, the political, economic, educational, and legal climate, are among the societal factors that influence the media (Davison, Boylan, and Yu, 1976). Any serious effort, however, to assess press performance in society must also consider other sources from which the media obtain materials that shape or help shape their content as well as structures within media organizations. Collectively called news infrastructures, these sources include government information office, local news agencies, foreign news services, and internal media organizational structures (Davison, Boylan, and Yu, 1976).

Government Information Office

This office is concerned with the gathering and dissemination of information. The various branches of this office serve as major outlets of news and information, particularly those concerning government policies and agenda. The ministry or department, as this office is known respectively in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, is expected to be a primary source of the daily news that is broadcast and reported in the government-run newspapers — in the case of Sierra Leone, *The Daily Mail* and in Nigeria *The Daily Times* and *The New Nigerian*. It is also expected to serve as a major training institute for government public relations and information officers.

Local News Agencies

These agencies gather and then distribute news and information to media houses. Both the Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA) and the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) are outcomes of the protracted and sometimes heated discussions at international forums of the imbalances in the flow of news and information between the advanced countries, and the less advanced countries and within the developing countries themselves. The establishment of these national news agencies is, therefore, in keeping with the ideals of the New Order which sees the creation of these agencies as a way of rectifying the prevailing imbalances in the gathering and distribution of news and information among the nations of the world. It invariably recognizes the dangers of reliance on foreign news agencies as well as the high rate of cultural imperialism resulting from the massive importation of foreign news products. For example, Reuters Economic Service (RES), Associated Press (AP), and Dow Jones distributed their economic services to mass media clients, as well as commercial houses, including banks and brokers in Lagos and other cities in Nigeria.

Foreign News Sources

Journalists in developing countries depend significantly on foreign sources for training and cultural products. These sources include the United States Information Service (USIS), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA), the wire services— Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), and Agence France Presse (AFP) - all of which, by virtue of their vast information resources, have the ability to greatly influence media content.

Restrictions Within Media Organizations

Restrictions within media organizations often come from media owners or gatekeepers such as editors, and in certain circum-

stances reporters (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991). Ownership influences can be direct (i.e. dictating what should or should not be published) or indirect (i.e. owner ideology influencing editor's decision on news slants, for instance). In addition, editors and reporters are likely to indulge in self censorship to win favor or in fact to hold on to their jobs.

Press Performance

How then might one evaluate press performance in developing countries such as Nigeria and Sierra Leone in the context of the above perspectives? Specifically, in the wake of the need to create sustainable development, how free is the press in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, and what contributions can be expected from the media systems in facilitating sustainable development in these countries? And, how democratic is the press in both countries?

McQuail (1987) has suggested that freedom of the press can be assessed according to different kinds of evidence, including:

1. Evidence at the societal level as indicated by the absence of laws and controls which limit the activities of the media.
2. Evidence at the level of media organizations where freedom can be measured in terms of the degree of control exercised by owners and managers over communication practitioners such as journalists, editors, and artists.
3. Evidence at the content level. Here, the concern is with the active use of editorial freedom which results in "clear differences between editorial content and what is offered by sources, propagandists and vested interests, generally more expression of critical or controversial points of view, more self-production of news and other content by media" (McQuail, 1987, p.127).

The above evidence scheme fits into factors which we had identified earlier as affecting sustainable development. Evidence number 1, for instance, is part of the social factor and evidence numbers 2 and 3 are essentially media level factors. Thus,

subsequent discussions on press performance in Nigeria and Sierra Leone will be based on the framework of social and media level factors.

Evidence at the Social Level

Nigeria and Sierra Leone are currently experiencing a resurgence of a multitude of media services, especially print media organizations, which immediately suggests one form of press freedom, the freedom to communicate. In Nigeria, the recent privatization of the electronic media has increased the number of broadcasting and cable services (Onwumechili, 1995; Bourgault, 1995; and Ebesemiju, 1993). Currently, about 16 newspapers in Sierra Leone, are published weekly and circulated primarily in the Freetown area. In Nigeria, there are more than 100 newspapers published in various state capitals. This resurgence of media services does not necessarily suggest high marks for media performance. Instead, media performance can better be assessed through analysis of various issues such as populations and economic factors, language and culture, education, laws and regulations.

Population and Economic Factors

Several studies have found that most African media focus on wealthy and urban residents (M'Bayo, 1991; and Adesonaye, 1990). M'Bayo (1991) studied media performance in Sierra Leone and his findings included the following:

1. Less prominent citizens who comprise the vast majority of the population, receive very little media attention in Sierra Leone and, hence, it can be inferred that their participation in the dynamics of modern communication in the country is minimal.
2. The sampled newspapers give significantly less coverage to rural community development projects as opposed to urban community development issues.

These conclusions are supported in an earlier study of Nigeria by Adesonaye (1990). Clearly, such findings indicate that the majority of the population in both countries do not have access to the mass media. The economic situation in both countries also means the exclusion of the majority of the people, including the poor urban. Sierra Leone, for instance, faces a huge media access problem because many of its approximately 4.5 million citizens are living in tattered penury and the country remains one of the poorest in the world (UNDP, 1993). An ongoing civil war that has caused the displacement of almost 70 per cent of the population has made the situation worse. Almost 70 per cent of the population is under 30 years of age and migration to Freetown, the nation's capital, is increasing at an alarming rate, partly because of the war. Economic theorists state that the mainstays of economic development and industrial growth are adequate natural resources, sufficiently trained labour, capital, and entrepreneurship (Seidman, 1980, p. 38). Sierra Leone, like many African countries such as Nigeria, has the necessary mineral as well as the potential energy resources. It has a large but unskilled labor force, but lacks the capital to acquire high productivity machinery and equipment necessary for a vibrant economy.

In contrast to Sierra Leone, Nigeria's population is estimated at about 128 million (Brittanica, 1993). The country is characterized by 250 distinct ethnic groups (Nwokeafor, 1992) but also has similar economic woes as Sierra Leone. The population is growing rapidly while petroleum production is fluctuating and agricultural production declining. Over all, the economic situation in Nigeria can be better described as depressed. Schwartz (1968) has described the merging of the different ethnic groups into a Nigerian nation as both a source of great strength and weakness. The media attempt to achieve a truly united nation of Nigeria has exposed several weaknesses, including poor media reach and inadequate media services to all ethnic groups which can be attributed to the growing population of the poor and illiterate, as well as the large number of ethnic groups, respectively.

Language and Culture

Language creates its own problems. More than 200 distinct dialects are spoken in Nigeria, and media services cannot meet the demand to provide language-appropriate services to each of these dialect groups. Even in cases where a particular group can access its dialect in the mass media, the time and space allocated for such a service is severely limited. For instance, Radio Sierra Leone broadcasts its daily news in four of the 15 languages, but carries only weekly news broadcasts in nine others. English remains the primary vehicle for broadcast programming, accounting for 60 per cent of broadcast time (Lengor, 1988). In the case of Nigeria, English is the primary vehicle for broadcast programming, accounting for 65 per cent of broadcast time (Nwokeafor, 1992). However, Radio Nigeria which operates mainly in English, broadcasts during prime time in three major Nigerian languages while the state radio stations do the same in other ethnic dialects.

Culture suffers from a similar predicament. A major question has been whose culture should be covered? Countries with several ethnic groups and accompanying cultural values present a complex problem for the national media. In some cases, some national private media simply ignore the government's development agenda of cultural promotion. For example, Onwumechili (1995) points out that Nigerian private media services have largely ignored or circumvented a recent electronic media privatization decree calling for at least 40 per cent local programming content.

Education

Education remains a major social problem. Adesonaye (1990) has argued, for instance, that a majority of people are illiterate in Nigeria. Clearly, a substantially illiterate populace reduces media access. To make matters worse illiteracy in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone is not restricted to inability to read and write

in English but also includes an inability to read and write in the local languages which are widely spoken. Few attempts to establish local language print media such as *Ogene* newspaper in Nigeria have failed because of very few readers. To compound the problem, Adesonaye reports that studies of *The Guardian* and the *Daily Times* in Nigeria between 1980 and 1983 showed that the readability levels were at the university graduate levels. In essence, high school graduates found it difficult to read both newspapers, drastically reducing readership in the country.

More over, the educated population, who mostly form the civil service cadre, have perhaps suffered disproportionately in the economic downturns of both countries. Their salaries have mostly remained frozen as inflation rose sharply. The consequence is that this population which constituted a preponderance of media consumers has been priced out of the media market. The net effect of this, inevitably, has been that while the literacy rate stands at 15 per cent in the case of Sierra Leone and approximately 45 per cent in Nigeria, active newspaper reading public has been considerably lower (M'Bayo, 1991 and Nwokeafor, 1992).

Laws and Regulations

Though the number of media services have increased in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, some of the newspapers have either gone underground, folded, or have been banned as a result of increasing harassment of journalists or vandalism and outright violence against newspaper establishments.

The constitutional provisions of both countries ensure protection of the freedom of expression, including the freedom to impart ideas and information. These constitutional regulations also make provisions for authorities to pass, under certain circumstances, pre-emptive regulations which curtail such freedom. Ogbondah (1992) lists several Nigerian military decrees designed to curtail the freedom of the press including a provision in Decree No.2 of 1984 (now abrogated) which allowed arbitrary

arrest and detention of journalists. Regulations and policies governing the freedom and right to information dissemination in both countries amount to giving them freedom with one hand and taking it with the other. Consequently, considering their constitutional power and mandate, the political leaders of both countries generate fear among journalists making it very difficult for most journalists to function effectively under the ethics of their profession.

Evidence at the Media Level

McQuail (1987) has argued that evidence of freedom at the media level includes 'clear differences' between editorial content and what is offered by sources or those with vested interests. He added that freedom entails independent or self-production of news. It is in this light that the issues of government information offices, local news agencies, foreign news sources, and restrictions within media organizations come up in an analysis of media performance in Sierra Leone and Nigeria.

Government Information Offices and Local News Agencies

Some of the major sources for news and information within both Nigeria and Sierra Leone are the government information offices and the local news agencies. These services are expected to advance development programs in both countries but several studies indicate that the reality has been quite different.

In Nigeria, for example, Nwokeafor (1992) studied over 1,000 randomly selected articles from 100 Nigerian newspapers (published between 1980 and 1990) and found that development issues do not receive any significant media attention. Ironically most of these newspapers are clients of government information offices and the local news agencies which are expected to disseminate development information.

Foreign News Sources

In studies conducted by M'Bayo (1991) and Nwokeafor (1992), it was found that the media give more attention to international issues or events happening outside of Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; second only to those originating from Lagos (Nigeria's commercial center) or Freetown (Sierra Leone's capital); than to issues or events in the local states as in the case of Nigeria and provinces as it relates to Sierra Leone. Pate (1992) also found that Nigerian newspapers focused on foreign news disproportionately. The three most covered countries by the Nigerian newspapers in his study were outside Africa — United States, United Kingdom, and the former Soviet Union. Of course, the local newspapers do not have the resources to send reporters overseas to cover these countries. Instead, news and information on the three countries were obtained from foreign news sources.

Restrictions Within Media Organizations

Media owners and managers also affect performance of media in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. A typical example is one provided by Olayiwola (1991) who recalled that when elected political rulers took over government media ownership in 1976 "the press became completely immersed in the vortex of partisan politics" (p.40). Olayiwola reported that journalists began to report press conferences they never attended and carried press releases that were never issued. In addition, the rise of media services can often be positively correlated with the rise of electioneering activities in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Olayiwola (1991) has also pointed out that the extent of media coverage was positively associated with victories in the 1979 Nigerian elections. All these were the result of ownership influence on media content and coverage. The Sierra Leone government has attempted to blunt ownership influences on the media by operating a semi-autonomous SLENA-the Sierra Leone News Agency. The government

plans to give the agency a free hand and total independence in its day-to-day operations. The immediate objectives of SLENA are to: "facilitate a greater circulation of information and news within the country and with the outside world, and to improve the nation's news gathering and distribution capacity by providing the necessary equipment and the training of nationals to operate the agency at the central office in Freetown and (the) four regional branches"(UNESCO, 1984, P-4).

Conclusion

If sustainable development includes democratization of communication i.e. making provisions for long term participation, equality, and exchange among the citizens in terms of communication activities, then the Nigerian and Sierra Leone press systems are neither democratic nor do they help towards sustainable development. Several factors such as population and economic status, language and culture, education, laws and regulations, and other media level factors adversely affect the performance of the media.

Population distribution, for instance, remains a major problem for media in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Communication systems and activities in both countries are significantly elite-urban in orientation while majority of the population resides in the rural areas. Furthermore, while public pronouncements may view the mass media as vital catalysts in the realization of sustainable national development goals and objectives, and while part of the basic questions about national development include concerns about the role of the mass media in the development process, these mass media systems and activities are definitely not development oriented (Nwokeafor and Nwanko, 1993; and M'Bayo, 1991). Instead, they still operate on the basis of patterns established in the colonial era, which tend to exclude rural and provincial folks from meaningful participation in national media systems.

These conclusions confirm what other researchers found in

similar studies (Ansah, 1986; Boafo, 1986; Koroma, 1987; and Karikari, 1990) describing communication systems and activities in different African countries. But, what is perhaps most intriguing in the case of Nigeria and Sierra Leone, is that newspapers in both countries pay more attention to events in the outside world than to events and rural peoples in their own countries.

Something must be fundamentally wrong with any press system that pays more attention to the outside world than it does to what goes on in the country in which it operates. Of course, infrastructural problems, including poor transportation network, the concentration of the publishing houses in urban areas, and the lack of trained professional journalists may all partly explain why the mass media operate the way they do in Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Other factors include the dependence of communication practitioners on foreign sources, including foreign news agencies, and newscasts which journalists may easily monitor. Foreign exchange problems which make it difficult or even impossible to acquire new equipment and other supplies, including at times even newsprint, are all bound to define the nature of the work journalists perform in these two countries.

The implications of all these are many. First, newspapers in both countries have not been used in any significant measure as channels for the achievement of sustainable development. Many of these newspapers were found to be carrying trivial materials, in some cases as much as 80 per cent of entire issues, comprising nothing more than seasons greetings or best wishes to the Head of State from the affluent members of the business community.

Secondly, and in terms of content, the definition of news for many of these newspapers is not different from Western definition of news. Because of this, the contention that Western media do not pay any significant attention to development news (M'Bayo, 1991; and Nwokeafor, 1992) is true as well for Nigeria and Sierra Leone newspapers.

Finally, an important element of effective and participative communication, whether at the interpersonal, organizational, or mass communication level, the element of feedback is almost non-existent in these mass media. There appears to be little provisions for that in Nigeria and Sierra Leone in mass communication contexts in both print and broadcast. It has been suggested that "creative freedom should be recognizable in novelty, experimentation, authenticity, individualism, as opposed to what is routine, predictable, standardized, recycled, (and) stereotyped" (McQuail, 1987, p. 126). From this perspective, and in terms of press performance and press freedom, Nigerian and Sierra Leonean newspapers cannot be considered to be free even within the framework of sustainable development guidelines.

The Imperatives of Democracy

That press freedom is a key element of democracy is no longer an issue of debate. The degree of press freedom in countries with liberal democracies is higher than those in authoritarian societies, and both seem to be positively correlated with sustained high standard of living and advanced economies in those countries. Thus, for countries now trying to promote democratic institutions as a route to sustainable development, the press should serve as an engine of change, and an instrument of transparency, probity, and accountability. Such a press system should not only be free but also responsible.

Engine of Change and Stability

The media should play a key role in promoting a greater degree of participation of the population in facilitating the democratic process within the framework of sustainable development. The press should be a major catalyst in creating an atmosphere where everyone is induced to mobilize his or her energies and resources to the fullest extent in the interest of a sustainable

higher standard of living for all and increased prosperity for the countries. This is the kind of society Nigerians and Sierra Leoneans have envisioned.

As an engine of change, the task of the press is "to extend public education and promote innovation in agriculture, health practice, population control, and other social and economic matters" (McQuail, 1987, p.97). In the area of education, for example, the media should actively be involved in literacy programs as a way of increasing the literacy rate and thereby broadening readership and participation in the dynamics of modern communication systems.

Instrument of Transparency, Probity and Accountability

As an instrument of transparency, a free press promotes efficiency and forestalls corruption in government. Economic progress, political stability, and a free press are all key elements in democratic societies. This is why it has been suggested that international donors should link aid arrangements with the basic question of press freedom in the efforts to promote sustained economic growth and political stability in the developing world. Sanford J. Ungar (1990) suggested, for instance, that not only are independent media among the most effective tools with which to fight corruption, but that international financial organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund must be urged to condition their loans on these factors.

Free but Responsible Press

Part of the requirements of a country seeking sustainable development, as we indicated earlier, is press freedom. Such free press must also be responsible. Keeping faith with the people, and maintaining their trust and respect are key elements of the press in such a society. The press should also reflect that society in terms of internal (within media organizations) and external

diversity in the media environment in general by providing a forum for diverse views on the issue of development.

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