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**THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT: FROM VISION TO
REALITY**

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ABSTRACT

African countries have prepared long-term plans and strategic visions for their national development that capture their aspirations, and these commonly include becoming industrialized by 2020 or at the latest 2030. However, the realization of these visions is constrained by several challenges. This paper will briefly examine the factors impeding implementation, and the positive role the media could play in accelerating the process.

Keywords: *national development plans, strategic visions, media, empowerment*

I. Development of National Visions and the Ordinary Citizen

One of these challenges is a lack of understanding of what the national development vision means to ordinary persons and how it will benefit them. For example, Kandetu (2012) says that most Namibians find the national document expressing their Vision 2030 complicated and difficult to understand. Some also point out that it was not circulated widely and, since it was often perceived as a government document with little relevance to ordinary life, few people have read it. Liberians have similar concerns. Many feel that their Vision 2030 document was not sufficiently widely publicized and that some of its elements need to be explained. These attitudes to national development visions are to be regretted, since all well-meaning citizens should be involved in some way in the preparation of their countries' visions and, accordingly, should feel a sense of ownership of them.

It appears that in the preparation of their plans many African countries did not include the views of either civil society or ordinary people. To address this problem, Kandetu (2012) and Watkins (2012) acknowledge that the media should be brought on board to provide a platform to sensitize citizens and to solicit their views on the national visions. This shortcoming is a sorry reflection on the status quo in the countries concerned, because members of the media are stakeholders of the national development visions and it is only natural that the mass media should be used as one of the mechanisms for implementing them.

II. The Challenges Faced by the Media in Africa

Over and above the constraints identified above, media outlets in Africa come up against other limitations, especially when covering certain topics or issues such as development. For example, a study conducted by the International Press Centre (IPC) of four Nigerian print papers shows that they did not fully cover development issues because of lack of access to information,

official secrecy and corruption in the media, and the poor working and welfare conditions of reporters (Garba, 2009). The same study assessed the coverage of development issues at as low as 14 per cent, while governance and related issues received 86 per cent coverage (Garba, 2009). The above figures do not indicate, however, whether the percentages are for the whole paper or for the news items excluding advertisements. Either way, the coverage of development issues is low.

Africa is not alone in this regard. Even in India, Chatterjee (2011) noted that the three mainstream Oriya newspapers show that development news constituted a mere 2 to 3 per cent of the total editorial space. Taking the front pages of these three largest circulated newspapers, the figures for development news are lower still: between 0.4 to 1.57 per cent (Chatterjee, 2011).

The other challenge is basically to understand that media outlets are businesses and they cater to the demand and needs of their customers. In most cases, the customers of media outlets look for entertainment news as opposed to serious matters such as development issues. In addition, some people find development news boring and, therefore, media houses mostly cover non-development issues in order to maximize profits. In some African countries – especially those emerging from civil war like Sierra Leone – local newspapers are not even breaking even from their sales (Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cole, 2008). Added to which, media outlets appear to have difficulty finding development stories that are interesting and sellable. Chatterjee (2011) firmly believes, however, that this is possible.

At the regional level, Games (2005) writing on the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), noted that many African journalists lack experience or interest in development-related issues. Games (2005) also observed that, at the national level, the media are currently not viewed as a major player in the implementation of NEPAD. In March 2012,

when meeting at their tenth anniversary colloquium, African leaders acknowledged that the media in many African countries inadequately reported progress made in the implementation of NEPAD. Ironically, the participants felt that the media in Africa continue to underperform in publicizing developmental visions, acting as passengers when they could be active partners.

III. Involving the Media in Implementing National Development Visions

A. Empowerment through Dialogue

These impediments notwithstanding, there are several positive examples that show how the media could contribute to the implementation of national development visions. A case in point, the African Media Initiative (AMI) Forum, held in Tunis in November 2011, confirmed that platforms for communication should be created such as structured discussions, talk shows, and organized debates in order to advance the national development visions.

Some years earlier, Warnock (2002) had already suggested an analogous approach, arguing that, instead of providing citizens with information, communication platforms should serve as a "dialogue" that empowers individuals and furthers development. For instance, the government of Uganda has established such platforms for communication, through a dynamic policy of issuing licenses for FM stations in key locations. These FM channels broadcast popular programmes, and feature a spectrum of issues for public discussion and debate (Warnock, 2002). Consequently, the country's development agenda is being transformed and people are more informed and eager to participate in development-related issues.

One instance where media communication platforms have prompted new initiatives for development may be seen in Zambia, where women's clubs dedicated to discussion, debate and feedback on women's issues, such as abortion and inheritance law, chose to broadcast their clubs' development related discussions over the airwaves. The resulting radio programme proved

to be very popular and this success has enabled the women involved to generate funds and in-kind assistance for their initiatives (Warnock, 2002). Accordingly, this grassroots radio programme has succeeded not only in disseminating information but also in empowering the women's clubs to participate in development programmes and projects, which form part of the national development vision. Through this media outlet, these women have become active participants in the national development discourse.

B. Effective Marketing through the Media

Another way in which the media can give added value to implementation of the national development visions is by effectively marketing them throughout the countries where they operate. This approach was extensively discussed at the 2011 AMI Forum. As explained by DeJong (2002), an axiom of effective marketing is using an assortment of media channels to provide a recognized, clear and consistent message. Marketing tactics in Africa are often obsolete and inadequate, however, and, as a result, many citizens neither know nor understand their own country's vision of national development. In addition, many impoverished African citizens, preoccupied with basic survival concerns, have little interest in these national development visions (Abati, 2009). For instance, at the grassroots level, many Nigerians are frustrated with the shortcomings of their country's Vision 2010, and have become cynical about national visions in general.

Marketing, which has a pivotal role in the development process, must therefore be implemented appropriately to combat such contemporary challenges and progress development. DeJong (2002), warns, however, that appropriate marketing strategies should be developed only after all relevant angles have been analysed, when considering development campaign objectives and strategies. For example, Rajendra Sharma, the Director of Training at *Radio Nepal*, reveals

that, while television is often considered a necessity for effective marketing campaigns, more accessible channels – primarily radio – often offer a more appropriate medium for marketing in regions where literacy rates are low and access to more technologically advanced equipment, such as computers and televisions, is limited.

This is very instructive for Africa. As revealed by the AMI Forum, the current African media marketing strategies, formed largely by radical changes, are rather media-centric and one-dimensional. Media owners, as suggested by the Forum, must therefore make a conscious effort to be more idea-centric (i.e. innovative), offering new and creative marketing and advertising strategies. Such new development-oriented marketing and advertising strategies will stimulate awareness and create a higher demand for the involvement and empowerment of all stakeholders in the implementation of the national development visions in Africa.

C. Use of Vernacular Languages

To ensure that all the stakeholders can appreciate, participate in and benefit from the national development visions, the media should be able to communicate in their respective local languages. With high illiteracy rates and a multitude of spoken languages in all African countries, the media have the advantage that they can educate people about their own countries, including their national development visions, by using their vernacular services. For example, in the state of Nagaland in India, as illustrated by B.K. Mohnaty (Doordarshan, India), 17 languages coexist, and illiteracy is still prevalent. To overcome these obstacles in Nagaland, the media started using folktales (essentially perceived by listeners as entertainment) as an instrument for the conveyance of information, and went on to provide development-oriented programmes in multiple languages. The use of a range of languages – and, specifically, local languages and dialects intelligible to the common person – served as a powerful tool in providing

such information. Thus, the importance of comprehensible media coverage, provided in multiple languages, is paramount to the execution of national development visions in Africa. Communication platforms, marketing strategies, empowerment initiatives, etc., will serve no purpose if not understood by the public. Accordingly, comprehensible media initiatives are crucial to future success in the implementation of national development visions.

D. Moving from Promise to Action

In conclusion, it is evident that the African continent is increasingly seen within reach of an economic and social transformation. The media, with their far-reaching ability to educate and empower citizens, represent a commanding tool in support of such transformation, and should be instrumental in the realization of Africa's development visions. As argued at the AMI Forum, however, increased partnerships between differing media, and their stakeholders, are necessary for success. Media agencies, confronted with the challenge of serving development goals, must collaborate and share information, identifying, in particular, best practices and inspiring stories about the development visions of individual countries. Africa's media sector, impeded by a lack of financial capital, must also deepen discussions and develop partnerships – primarily international partnerships – with other potential stakeholders. Capital is an important asset to the continent as it moves forward in this new era – but the know-how is perhaps of equal importance in this regard. Such collaboration, undertaken in a genuine pan-African spirit, is key to the successful implementation of national development visions, not only under NEPAD's auspices, but also by individual African countries. It is there, at the door of civil society, that empowerment ultimately lies and the media can play their historic role.

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