



COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF DEVELOPMENT ISSUES IN THE SOUTH EAST, NIGERIA

Chibe Ofor, PhD

Mass Communication Department, Ave Maria University, Piyancha, Nasarawa State.
Chibeofor777@gmail.com +2348068104429

Background to the Study

Globally, development is a central concern among the nations of the world. Improvement and progress are the major business of many countries. A nation can truly be said to be alive and active when it grows and develops. Talabi, et al (2019) holds that development is critical to the well-being of any nation. Every developing country is conscious of her community and national welfare, as she takes to cognizance the need to improve the living standard of her citizens via social welfare programs that leads to social and economic development. This is why Lawal & Abe (2011, p. 9) contend that “development is critical and essential to the sustenance and growth of any nation. A country is classified as developed when she is able to provide quality life for her citizenry”. Shah (2012, p.13) shares the same line of thinking arguing that “national development relates to improvements in managing natural and human resources to create wealth and improve people’s lives”. This means that all nations of the world are primarily in pursuit of development.

But national development revolves around the people. For Soola (2003) in Talabi et al (2019, p.11): “Development must therefore be of the people, by the people and for the people. It 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 abuses and similar deprivations”

To achieve the development of the people however, information is an indispensable factor. A country that strives to be acknowledged either as developing or developed nation puts up a reliable system of information or media that reaches every nook and cranny of where the people exist. Information is thus a formidable force for the growth and development of the people. Talabi, et al (2019, P. 9) expressed this fact thus: “It is, however, imperative to note that communication is the major instrument for social integration and human development at all spheres of life. The media, being the vehicle through which effective communication is achieved, play significant roles in human and national development”. Along this lane Raufu (2017) holds that the role of mass media is primarily on development communication where the media specializes in giving important information to a large number of people in the society.

In the light of the foregoing, Nigerian media; especially the newspaper is playing a vital role in ensuring consistent qualitative development. It strives to ensure that the



people are conscious of their needs and that the government is responsible socially, economically and politically to the people. In Hamza (2023), we see that the Mass Media are considered as having a major function of information dissemination through the process of gathering and managing of information and ideas in all societies. The media can create awareness, knowledge, change attitudes, and transform behaviours. The media can equally foster engagement and supports in formulating sound national policies which are elements that transform societies towards growth and development.

On further account of the role of the media, Suleiman (2019) stated that development is achievable if the media focuses more on reporting the plight of the people and their communities. The media thus bridges the gap between the government and the people by presenting the critical challenges that the citizens face to the government and thus force them to direct the needed resources to address these challenges in order to improve the living conditions of the people. Consequently, Nazari & Hassan, (2011) noted in Sanusi, (2022) that the media can play an important role in creating the agenda for development concerns by communicating key information to the public. This allows people to talk and learn about a wide range of topics. Again, Baki (2015) cited in Sanusi, (2022) argues that the media contributes to community progress in a variety of ways; including facilitating communication between people from different parts of society, aiding in human and material development, promoting local cultural preservation, and disseminating information with a development focus.

Nevertheless, Newspapers, radio, and television continue to be the most widely used forms of mass media in the development of countries. These sources of information are useful for disseminating information regarding a number of societal challenges. Copeland, (2003) opined in Sanusi, (2022 p.15) that "Newspapers are a type of mass communication that can have an impact on political, military, corporate, intellectual, and social organizations, as well as people's health and safety". Newspapers excel in fostering public dialogue and discussion, which are critical for the growth of a society. Congruently, Aiyesimoju & Awoniyi, (2012) argued in Sanusi, (2022) that newspapers are more reliable than radio and television, the two fastest forms of mass media, because they are printed on permanent paper, they include more information, and are more authoritative in general.

Yet, most of the past development efforts by newspapers in Nigeria has been preoccupied with promotion of urban-based-economic development; leading to unfortunate consequence of neglect of rural areas community-based development. But scholars noted that development of a nation cannot be achieved without the development of rural communities. In national development programs, the rural community newspaper plays a great role in increasing the awareness, and adoption of recommended ideas, technologies, practices and strategies among the rural people through targeted information and motivational messages. Oso, (2017) Agbaje (2018) held that community newspapers provide access to information on development



initiatives on health, education, agriculture etc. The same community newspaper can foster community participation and engagement in development projects.

Thus, newspapers according to (Wilson, 2008) should make reference to basic needs of communities. This means that newspaper Journalism bothers around critical reportage on health, social welfare, and basic amenities; such as clean water, good road, electricity, and industry and job opportunities as it concerns a particular community. Since most urban-based newspapers in Africa neglect rural community-centred matters, there is a call for greater attention to community newspapers.

Neglected by the urban-based newspaper in their strives for development, rural communities have resorted to community newspapers as a glue to bind the community people together and facilitate social and economic development in the rural communities. Community newspapers seek to give the rural communities a voice. It serves as a medium through which the rural people can air their views and opinions on issues, and equally as a means of enlightenment and education that leads to community development. It delves into community affairs and becomes the voice of the voiceless in the hidden places of our local communities. It bridges the gap between the government and the local communities and ensures effective development for the people.

For Esteves (2024), community Newspapers provides a platform for the marginalized. This local platform has the capacity to amplify the voices of marginalized groups, promoting inclusivity and social justice. Such grass root media can drive social change by highlighting social issues, promoting inclusivity, and advocating for marginalized groups. Čajka & Novotný (2024) noted in their work that communities Newspapers can contribute to sustainable development, by covering environmental issues and fostering community engagement. Most often, community engagement is achieved through the community commitment of the community newspapers done through covering of local issues and events (Oso, 2017). Okoro (2020) understood this reasoning well when he held that community newspapers preserve and promote local culture, traditions, and values by featuring local stories and histories. Following this line of thinking, this study revolves on community newspapers and their coverage of development issues particularly in the south eastern parts of Nigeria relying on development media theory.

Development Media Theory

Development media theory emphasizes the role of the media in promoting national development particularly in developing countries. This theory propounded by Denis McQuail in 1987 was formulated to address the role of the media in developing countries and communities. The theory holds that media in the developing countries and communities should attend to their basic need which is development. The mass media should see communication channels such as newspaper and magazines as instruments for the development of underdeveloped countries and communities.



The broad tenet of this theory is that the media should support national development goals and priorities. The mass media is equally expected to be agents of nation-; such as economic, social and cultural development. On a specific sense, this theory holds that the media should provide information and education on development issues, promote cultural values and support development initiatives.

McQuail (1987) articulated the basic principles of Development media theory in this way:

- Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with established national policy.
- Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development need of the society.
- Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language.
- Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally and politically.
- Journalist and other media workers have responsibility as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination task.
- In interest of development end, the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict media operation and devices.

Development media theory recognizes the fact that a society undergoing transition from underdevelopment to development should concentrate in addressing their developmental issue through their various channels of mass communication. This means that the media coverage of various local communities of Africa and Asia should concentrate on their infrastructure, basic amenities, skills and empowerments that will lift the society from poverty to prosperity, illiteracy to education, scarcity to abundance.

The strength of this theory is seen clearly with its emphases on the potential of media to drive development and social change. The theory held to the importance of the media in promoting national goals and encourages the media to play a proactive role in development. However, the criticism of this theory is associated with government control and censorship leading to loss of media independence. Besides, sometimes there may be this tendency of an extreme priority of national interest over individual freedom.

Concept of Community

Community is regarded as a web of social interactions associated with people who do things in common, share same value, norms, belief, language and belief in close interaction with a level of autonomy. For scholars, it is an aggregate of people living together in a geographical area and bound together socially, culturally, economically and politically (Anaeto and Anaeto, 2010). Baskin and Aronoff (1988) in Anaeto and



Anaeto (2010, p. 15) noted that a “community is a place of interacting with social institutions which produce in the residents an attitude and practice of inter-dependence, cooperation, collaboration and unification”. This means that co-operation, unity and collaboration are outstanding qualities of every community.

For Emory (2020), community as a social and emotional construct, is marked by a shared sense of belonging among people based on common values, norms, and interests. It can be seen as a “social units” formed through complex relationships between individuals, and emphasizing interactions, roles, and social systems that contribute to the community's functioning. For Morris (1926) community is a group bound together by a shared way of life, including common goals, values, and customs. He stressed the importance of culture in shaping a community and the role of collective aspirations.

These scholars in their views emphasize shared space, social relationships and common life and values. Shared space which entails physical or social space is central to community formation. Social relationships entail interactions and relationships binding the group together. While common life and values involve shared way of life; goals, values and customs are essential to the community.

Concept of Community Newspaper

Newspaper according to Encyclopaedia Britannica is a paper that is printed and distributed usually daily or weekly, which contains news, articles of opinion, features and advertising. It is regularly published; and it is a printed or digital publication that provides news, information and articles on current events, trends and issues to the public. The aim is always to convey current information efficiently, covering a range of topic from local news to international affairs.

In line with the above meaning, Community newspaper is a locally-oriented paper occasionally printed and distributed to provide information to a community and to enhance sense of unity, collaboration, co-operation and inter-dependence within such community. For Sommerland (2009), it is a newspaper that serves to build a community by providing news and information to build the people's quality of life. Community newspaper provides contents that are relevant and responsive to the need and aspirations of the rural people. Hence, it is development-oriented publication. As such, most community newspapers seek information that will empower the rural dwellers and accelerate holistic development.

Along with these backdrops, Kasomo (2019) in Oso (2003, p. 11) refers to community newspaper as “a regular publication which carries news stories, features, editorial, illustration or pictures as well as advertisement for rural people. It is put together and published by the rural folk in their own community”. Ramirez (1989) congruently noted that community “newspaper serves as a window of the community to the outside world and it is the link to the mainstream of information and national life. The



qualities associated with community newspaper are therefore; accessibility, affordability, community-oriented, community participation and community-ownership. Generally, the newspaper caters for all that makes for togetherness and development of a community.

Indeed, information is an essential component of our daily and economic life. In the modern era of digital transformation, the need for information keeps increasing. Digital messages have become part and parcel of our daily lives as communicators reaches every corner of the world with volumes of information through the digital technology. Amidst explosion of information, every human being clamour for access to relevant and accurate information in the cities and communities. Everyone wants to be informed in making informed decisions towards achieving some goals. In this context, Community newspaper steps in as the satisfier for “the hunger for information” in the rural communities.

It was on this background that Boafo (2005) in Anaeto and Anaeto (2010) held that in African countries, there is need to lay more emphasis on the importance of community newspaper to ensure that local communities are not cut off from communication and information grid. Here then lies the relevance of community newspaper as an approach to dissemination of information; a relevance that are articulated in these terms:

- a. **Grassroots communication:** As international newspaper disseminate information on international issue, national newspaper reaches the nation with national new, community newspaper specializes in grassroots community whereby information are disseminated to the local people at the grassroots of the society.
- b. **Direct Benefit to rural People:** Global news can satisfy global interest while national news can be of national benefit to news consumers. But community newspaper is designed to benefit the rural people in their rural environment.
- c. **Accessibility:** While global and national news are accessible to those in the developed cities through international and national dailies, it is only the community newspaper that is readily accessible to rural people in their rural environment.
- d. **Commitment:** The newspaper originates from the community and revolves around the community in its dissemination of information; hence it is replete with sense of commitment as it reflects the feelings of the community. This is unlike the global newspapers that are far separated from the community.
- e. **Developmental need:** The major interest of most community newspapers is for the local developmental need of the local community. Beyond the profit-maximization pursuit of global newspapers, community newspaper concentrates on the pursuit of growth and development of the rural community.

Truly, a local community newspaper that is informative, accessible and beneficial to the rural people can strengthen a community and increase their capacity of growth.



This means that with a sense of commitment on the path of the community newspapers, development will be accelerated. This is more so as community newspapers help to fine-tune the world view of the down-trodden, optimize their voice and bring them closer to decision making processes at the central level. Realizing this inextricable role, the founding fathers of Nigerian politics, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe established provincial newspapers which served as the springboard for the establishment of radio and television stations in the 1960s and 1970s (Ate and Ikerodah, 2012).

Community Newspaper in Nigeria

The origin of community newspaper could be traced to 1859 when Rev Henry Townsend championed the: *Iwe Irohin* in Abeokute. According to Akinfeleye (1985:28), Townsend stated his objective thus: "My object is to get the people to read". This means that he intended to instil a habit of seeking information in the people on matters that concern them. The newspaper was primarily packaged for Egba people in order to make them seek information from their environment by reading newspaper. It was published in Yoruba language.

Moreover, following the same spirit of the father founder of community newspaper, most of the community newspapers that have operated in Nigeria were packaged for exclusive audience based on the language of expression, like; *Udoka* (Igbo), *Amana* (Hausa) and *Isokan* (Yoruba), while others cut across states such as *Community Concord*, owned by late Chief M.K.O Abiola. Other newspapers were locality specific, like *Nigeria Mirror* and *Confidence* in Anambra; *Ebonyi Times* in Ebonyi State, *Evening Times* in Lagos, *Idemili Voice* in Anambra; *OriwuSun*, *Ikorodu* in Lagos; *Village News*, *Abeokuta* in Ogun State; *Ikale News*, *Ikale* in Ondo State and *Kaduna State* has *Zaria-based Gaskiya TafiKwabo*; amongst others (Udoakah, 1998 and Agba, 2002). Other newspapers still include *Ibadan news* in Ibadan, *Remo Star* in Abeokuta, *Oke-Ogun News* in Saki and *Oloye News* in Igbeti Oyo state. Among these hordes of community newspapers, *Oriwu Sun* of *Ikorodu* area of Lagos stands out in its current operation (Ate and Ikerodah, 2012).

The journalists of these community newspapers made use of the publication to attract the attention of the civil authorities to the living conditions of the people and as bases for the implementation of state and local government projects. These papers became the voice of the voiceless people in the local communities. Since the papers were designed for the interest of the community and her wellbeing, the newspapers contribute to sensitizing the community members about their living conditions, and in so doing that acts as an intermediary between the government and the governed.

Community Newspaper in the South East, Nigeria

In the South East Nigeria majorly populated by Igbos, Community newspaper has been associated as agent of interactions among people who do things in common,



share same value, norms, belief and language. Most of the early community newspapers that arose in that part of Nigeria with common norm and values (such as Ogene, Udoka, Osiza, Ka Odi Taa, Ikoroet.c) surfaced in Igbo language. These early newspapers in the South East Nigeria rose from various groups and sections of the South East. These newspapers with committed interest on the affairs and interest of the South East strived to facilitate the development of this region at their various times through their development journalism. The outstanding feature among them is the promotion of the cultural value by their commitment to the Language of the South East; which is Igbo Language.

However, the later Community newspapers were not faithful to the use of Igbo Language as medium of communication. The later community newspapers in the South East which are majorly championed by religious and individual communities went back to English Language to sustain the flow of their communication and to reach wider audience. It is these recent and operational community newspapers that are of major interest to this study.

Concept of Development Issues

Development, according to Dictionary Cambridge is the process of growth and change either individually or collectively, leading to a more advanced or mature state. Lurdes (2013) views it as a process of improving to be better than the initial stage. Development is thus is a process that creates growth, progress and positive change in a society. It is equally the improvement of the standard of living of a person, community or nation. It denotes improving people, their lives and their area.

Development is the most pressing challenges facing human race, nations and communities in our time. Underdevelopment has been associated with many countries, states and communities in the second and third world. These countries and communities are ever battling with economic growth, good governance, security and environmental challenges in their strives to ensure quality life for their people. Hence, these nations and communities are ever addressing poverty and inequality as their key developmental issues, at the same time striving for economic progress and clear reduction of poverty and inequality. This is while the entire world orders as championed by the United Nations is ever moving toward sustainable development by addressing the various issues associated with underdevelopment (Guterres, 2019)

Development issue consists of subject matters that contribute to the improvement in the well-being of a people. It equally speaks of topic that revolves around the economic, political and social capacity of a people as it concerns their well-being. Mabogunje (1980) observed that development involves “economic growth, modernization, equitable distribution of income, national resources and socio-economic transformation. Development is generally viewed as multi-faceted process of transformation that includes structural, societal changes and improved individual well-being.



Naomi (1995) congruently held that development goes beyond economic growth to equitable distribution of resources and essential services like healthcare, education and housing. This means that development is not merely economic endeavour, it involves economic and political issues in the society. As such, Rodney (1972) even opines that development is a many-sided process where individuals and societal group increase their capacity to master their environments and meet their various needs.

In his call for development journalism that touches every aspects of human life, Anaeto and Anaeto (2010) noted that development issues should include improved quality of life seen in good road, good job, and provision of electricity, pipe-born water, health materials and school. Based on these fundamental issues that make up the development of a community therefore, there is an urgent need for community newspaper with community journalists that concern themselves with development issues and address developmental problem of poverty, disease, unemployment, ignorance and backwardness via enlightenment, education, conscientization, encouragement, social mobilization, and advocacy.

Mass Communication and Community Development

Accelerated and sustained development is often achieved through strategic communication. To alleviate poverty, illiteracy, joblessness and backwardness in most local communities, the service of planned process of communication through the mass media especially community newspaper is indispensable. Based on this reality, Onabajo (2002:p.9) holds that a strategic communication can creates awareness on the need for “rural intervention aimed at improved productivity, increased employment for the target group as well as minimum acceptable level of food, shelter, education, health and housing”.

Therefore, a quality communication process through the mass media is geared towards enlightening and empowering the community to set priority in their community through effective and democratic agencies. This can be achieved through enlightenment that leads to the provision of local capacity and investment in basic infrastructure and social services. Wete (1988: p.11) is of the view that mass communication can be used in many cases of community level to “transmit information of a background nature to a group or community about their expressed need and to disseminate innovations that will meet these need. This calls for a community’s involvement in communication planning and dissemination of information”. Be that as it may, Anaeto and Anaeto (2010, p. 3) opined that while addressing the various development issues in the community, communication through the mass media especially community newspaper tend to achieve the following for the community:

- Improved quality and standard of life for the rural area.
- Provision of social facilities and infrastructure such as good road, electricity and regular water supply.



- Stimulation of economic activities and growth in the community.
- Improvement of economic condition of the rural dwellers and reduction of the disparity between the rural and urban dwellers.
- Enhancement of the food capacity of the rural farmers to make food easily available.
- Promotion of employment for rural dwellers.
- Provision of facility for education and literacy.

Thus, mass media has remained a veritable instrument in the dissemination of information that will aid various rural communities on the process of development. This is clearly done through their coverage of information that revolves around human needs and interest; such as health, agriculture, nutrition and employment. The mass media can equally be used as instrument of social mobilization, education, motivation and enlightenment. These activities are geared towards improving the people's standard of living and accelerating holistic development.

Impact of Community Newspaper Coverage on the Development of South East, Nigeria

The height of news coverage or provision of information has always been connected with development in the rural places. Scholars have discovered some link between the quality reporting or dissemination of information on a particular issue of human interest and rural development. Wilson (2005) noted in Anaeto and Anaeto (2010, p. 33) that "the provision of information can lead to development in our homes, villages and towns....When people are liberated mentally; their mind will become dressed for national development".

Moreover, Ramirez (1989) in Anaeto and Anaeto (2010, p. 50) held the opinion that community newspapers through their news coverage "acts as instrument of change by affecting many other channels and instruments of change". This means that the community newspaper is an instrument of social change and development. It predisposes the people towards a positive and favourable attitude, towards innovation, community and national development. Nawaz (1984) share the same idea when he stated that most developing countries and their governments has made committed attempt to use mass media to educate, inform their population and at the same time strive to promote economic and social development.

For Anaeto and Anaeto (2010) the community newspaper through their coverage highlights and draws attention to the economic potentials of a community that can attract investors leading to industrial production that leads to job opportunity, improved income, infrastructure and general development of the community. For Nawaz (1984), this developmental agenda is chiefly achieved through education and information campaign. But the general view of scholar is that through organized and sustained news coverage, sustained development can be achieved in various communities particularly the ones in the South East, Nigeria.



Conclusion

Nwanne, (2013) held in the study: "Perspective on Community Media and Rural Development in Nigeria" that communities' media are well appreciated by the people because they are sensitive to their needs. Community media are well suited to the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve, thereby promoting development in various aspects. With more commitment to the course of community media, there is a clear likelihood that community newspapers will make maximum impact in the lives of the people of South East, Nigeria.

Santas (2013) stated in Badiru, and Ajao (2015) that rural development in relations to Africa will be inadequate if it does not accommodate rural development orientation. In the light of the foregoing, rural journalism becomes relevant in communicating the needs and aspirations of the rural people to the government. The primary function of community newspapers in the South East, Nigeria then is addressing the development needs of the people and influencing their lives through rural journalism. Newspaper has to help in improving the standard living of people from various communities. This means that community newspapers can have tremendous impact on the development of communities in the South East, Nigeria.

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