NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF POVERTY ISSUES IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL COMMUNICATION POLICY PLANNING

BY

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The Brookings Institution in June 2018 released a report in which Nigeria was rated as the poorest country in the world, overtaking India. The report recorded that 87 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty. This paper examines factors responsible for growing poverty in Nigeria and analyzes the role of Nigerian Newspapers in exposing such factors. Two newspapers were purposively selected, Punch and Guardian Newspapers, and Content Analysis method was used where 240 editions were studied covering a six-month period. The purpose is to determine the pattern, frequency and direction of newspaper coverage of poverty issues in Nigeria. Findings showed that Nigerian newspapers, represented by the Punch and Guardian, did not consider issues about poverty serious, rather politics and the crises between Farmers and Fulani Herdsmen dominated the Newspaper in the period under study. While the Punch Newspaper has a high frequency rate of poverty issues reporting, the Guardian Newspaper gave more attention, in terms of prominence. It is recommended that poverty be considered a serious national development challenge by journalists and policymakers, and its reduction strategies integrated into national communication policy by policy planners, bearing in mind that the right information will empower and inspire the right attitude capable of lifting citizens out of poverty

**Keywords:** Development. Economic Empowerment. Poverty. Public Policy. Policy Planning.
INTRODUCTION

• There is no good reason why Nigeria should be a poor country and Nigerians suffer poverty given the amount of natural resources and population advantage the country enjoys except for the wanton stealing and mismanagement of public wealth by the political elite. Nigeria occupies the enviable position of strength as the most populous country in Africa with a population estimated at 180 million and constituting about eleven percent of total population of Africa which is around 1.2 billion.

• The Brookings Institution, an American research group founded in 1916, rated Nigeria as the poverty capital of the world. Nigeria therefore has overtaken India as country with the highest population of poor people in the world.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Based on the recent report by the Brookings Institution, using data from the World Poverty Clock, Nigeria currently has over 87 million people living in extreme poverty. With pervasive poverty in Nigeria, is it likely that media reports on extent of poverty and factors responsible for the current state of extreme poverty, can help change the attitude of policymakers and economic planners, including citizens, towards addressing the issues of poverty. The concern is whether adequate information by the media can lead to awareness and behavior change among policymakers and empower citizens to take rightful actions in a way that would ensure poverty reduction. In addition, that relevant information through the media can lead to attitudinal change as to bring about reduction in poverty, hence need for a national communication policy that takes into account poverty issues.
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In line with the stated research problem, this study will pursue the following objectives;

1. To determine whether poverty issues received adequate attention (frequency, placement and prominence) in Punch Newspaper in the period of study in 2018.

2. To determine whether the amount of Punch Newspaper reports on poverty issues, within the period, is significant enough to drive policy action toward poverty reduction.

3. To determine whether the framing of poverty news report is significant enough to influence or necessitated attitudinal change and proper understanding of poverty issues by policymakers.
**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- In line with the stated research objectives, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Does the Punch Newspaper consider news about poverty issues relevant (frequency and placement) in view of global concerns?

2. Is the dominant pattern (straight news, editorial, features, etc) of poverty news in the Punch Newspaper sufficient to raise the needed awareness about the rising rate of poverty in Nigeria?

3. Do Journalists consider reporting poverty related news as important to national development?

4. Can inclusion of poverty reduction strategy as important element of national communication policy positively influence journalistic attention in favour of poverty related issues or news?
• PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this work is to examine how Punch Newspaper in Nigeria reported on poverty issues and to determine whether the nature of reports is such that it can influence a change in the way poverty issues are perceived and addressed from a communication policy point of view. Furthermore, in realizing that poverty can be solved through attitude change resulting from effective communication and empowerment, this study intends to suggest ways by which national communication policy planners can factor in strategies to address issues considered to be contributory factors to widespread poverty in Nigeria.
THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Agenda Setting Theory and Development Media theory are selected because they are both relevant for this study.

1. Agenda Setting Theory accepts that the media can set agenda on discussion regarding poverty issues and that such agenda will influence public policy. The Agenda Setting Theory explains that the importance and interpretation people attach to items on the public agenda are strongly influenced by how the media present news stories on those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

2. Development Media theory was developed from the UNESCO commission of 1979 inaugurated to research on positive development in many societies born out of media performances. This theory portrays the media as agents of development which should not only report developmental issues or projects but activate the interest of the public towards such projects.
LITERATURE REVIEW

• Nearly half of the world’s population, which is about 3 billion people plus, live on less than $2.50 a day. More than 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty, less than $1.25 a day. 1 billion children worldwide are living in poverty. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty while 805 million people worldwide do not have enough food to eat.

• Poverty according to Wikipedia definition is “the scarcity or the lack of a certain (variant) amount of material possessions or money”. Extreme poverty which amounts to destitution refers to the complete lack of the means necessary to meet basic personal needs such as food, clothing and shelter (WIKIPIDIA, Sourced August 13, 2018)
Content Analysis is used for this study. Population of study is 120 editions of Punch Newspaper. Period of study covers from January 2018 to June 2018. Purpose of content analysis is to look at the frequency and direction of report, framing and pattern of reporting of poverty issues within this period under study. Only Monday to Friday weekly editions are used for the purpose of this work. Content categories considered are frequency, attention and prominence. In addition to Content Analysis, Survey method by way of an Interview was used to collect the opinion of a news and business editor. Feedback was used to measure the influence of journalistic perception towards poverty related issues and if that perception plays a role in determining how journalists decide to report on poverty issues. Punch Newspaper was purposively selected and the selection is justified based on the following factors;
Table 1.

Frequency of Punch Newspaper Report on Poverty issues by Month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAN.</td>
<td>9 (16.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEB.</td>
<td>6 (10.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARCH.</td>
<td>12 (21.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APRIL</td>
<td>10 (17.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>8 (14.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUNE</td>
<td>11 (19.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (%)</td>
<td>56 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table 1 above shows that a total of 56 units of poverty issues was reported by Punch Newspaper over a six-month period. The month of March with 12 items representing 21.4% frequency recorded the highest units of news items related to poverty followed by June with 11 items at 19.6%.
Table 2.

Prominence Count of Poverty Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Front Page</th>
<th>Back page</th>
<th>Editorial page</th>
<th>Inside Page</th>
<th>TOTAL (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>2 (3.5%)</td>
<td>5 (9.0%)</td>
<td>3 (5.3%)</td>
<td>46 (82.1%)</td>
<td>56 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 represents the prominence count of poverty related news over the period. It shows that poverty stories didn’t receive high prominence, with high percentage of inside page stories.
Table 3

Analysis of Content Categories;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Category</th>
<th>Straight News</th>
<th>Editorial</th>
<th>Feature Article</th>
<th>Opinion Article</th>
<th>Photo/Others</th>
<th>TOTAL (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freq. Count</td>
<td>26 (46.4%)</td>
<td>3 (5.3%)</td>
<td>10 (18.0%)</td>
<td>14 (25.0%)</td>
<td>3 (5.3%)</td>
<td>56 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows categories of poverty news reports as captured. Straight news dominates at 26 (46.4%) followed by opinion/article at 10 (18.0%). Editorial ranks lowest meaning that punch newspaper didn’t place high editorial value on poverty news over this period.
Table 4

Direction of poverty reports by Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direction</th>
<th>Favorable / Positive</th>
<th>Neutral Balance</th>
<th>Unfavorable / Negative</th>
<th>TOTAL (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freq. Count</td>
<td>26(46.4%)</td>
<td>14(25.0%)</td>
<td>16(29.0%)</td>
<td>56(100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 explains that a high number of poverty reports were positive as to offer ways by which Nigeria can solve the problem and actions required to solve the problem at 26 (46.4%)
DEDUCTIONS/DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS (ANSWER RESEARCH QUESTIONS)

This discussion will be based on the three key research questions raised. Answers to the questions will be based on the data collected using content analysis method.

1. **Research Question 1:** *Does the Punch Newspaper consider news about poverty issues relevant (frequency and placement) in view of global concerns?*

   From the data presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3, it is safe to say that the Punch Newspaper, within the period under review, did not consider news about poverty issues relevant seeing that only 56 news items were concerned about the level of poverty in Nigeria and from this, only just about 7% received prominent placements (front page 3.5% and Editorial page 3.5%).

2. **Research Question 2:** *Is the dominant patterns (straight news, editorial, features, etc) of poverty news in the Punch Newspaper sufficient to raise the needed awareness about the rising rate of poverty in Nigeria?*

   The dominant pattern of news which is straight news without adequate investigative and human-interest perspective does not suggest that enough awareness about poverty in Nigeria can be achieved (Table 3:46.3%) as to sufficiently raise the needed awareness on the issue of poverty.
3. Research Question 3: Do Journalists consider reporting poverty related news as important to national development?

a. Can inclusion of poverty reduction strategy as important element of national communication policy positively influence journalistic attention in favour of poverty related issues or news?

This question would be answered through survey /face to face interview with Editor, BusinessDay Newspaper, Mr. Zebulon Agomuo. Answers are below
• The essence of journalism itself is for national development. Every issue that touches on the wellbeing of individual members of society is of great importance to journalists. You cannot talk about the wellbeing of a nation without talking about the individual members of that society. So, the question as to whether journalists consider the issue of poverty as being critical does not arise. It is the media that highlight the plight of the down-trodden for government, politicians, banks and the philanthropists to take action.

• The recent report by Brookings Institution that placed Nigeria as the world's poorest country was made a big issue by journalists, who through verifiable indices, tried to draw the Federal Government's attention to the truth in the report, despite the usual habit of government to play the ostrich and live in denial.
Answer:

• On the second leg of the question. As earlier stated, journalists are doing their best in bringing to the fore the poverty issue in the country, the problem is not isolated from the systemic problem in the country, where government or policy makers choose what they want to hear/read and the issues they want to tackle. It is not about "inclusion of poverty-reduction strategy as an important element of national communication policy". Well, this may not be altogether out of place, but the buck still stops at the table of those who read about all these things, yet they carry on as though nothing has happened.
Answer:

• But truth be told, it would amount to living in denial if one could say the media is faultless in all of this. This is because there are a whole lot of things the media should be doing that it is not doing. It is the role of the media and media managers to research into areas of felt need in society.

• Newspapers need to be well-structured to cater to the need of society. Journalists must not write and publish what they think people need but must serve the people reports that they really need. What we have seen is that people who have the means to do these things are flying blind. The need of the moment; areas of felt-need and market need should be the compass as well as the focus.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The mass media, especially newspaper, has an important role to play towards achieving the goal of reducing poverty in Nigeria. The reason is because policymakers and economic policy planners depend on the news, analysis, reports and expositions carried out by the media to determine burning national issues and by so decided national development priorities and agenda.

The media largely set agenda for national development issues, therefore issues relating to growing poverty should be given increased attention and prominence by the media to underscore the need for a better policy towards reducing poverty in Nigeria seeing that it has become the most worrisome national development problem and a source of embarrassment.
Poverty reductions issue should be vital to national communication policy planning. Poverty reduction awareness should be spread to rural communities. The media should provide relevant information and data to expose the grave negative impacts of poverty on Nigerian’s population. If nothing is done urgently, Nigeria will continue down the spiral of poverty.

In conclusion and by way of recommendation, the Mass media should take seriously its big role in highlighting issues of poverty in Nigeria, with the objective being to educate people on the wide range of factors reasonable for poverty and essentially direct government policy action towards solving the problem of extreme poverty.

National communication policy planning should consider the importance of providing adequate data about the rate of poverty in mostly rural areas as a way to aid policy of government.

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THANK YOU