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CHILD RIGHTS AND MEDIA DEMOCRATIZATION: AN AGENDA FOR REALIZATION OF THE MDGs IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals to be achieved by 2015. The Goals have become an international framework for development and a platform for developing countries and their partners to work together. UNICEF has called attention to the fact that meeting the MDGs requires paying serious attention to the rights of children. Its position is that "six of the eight millennium development goals can best be met as the rights of children to health, education, protection and equality" and that "they will only be sustained as the rights of every child are realized". However, the current situation of children is far from the ideal, especially with the developing nations, Nigeria inclusive. There is therefore the need for urgent actions to protect the rights of the child in order to meet the Millennium Goals. A critical step in this direction is the engagement of the media. The media play a key role in encouraging people's participation in the realization of the goals, especially where it has to do with holding the government accountable for the Millennium promise. This paper argues that the current Nigerian media system is not in a position to satisfy the media needs for realizing the MDGs. It therefore calls for a more vibrant media structure and practice that will ensure information democratization in order to popularize child rights and consequently aid the fulfillment of MDGs.

Key words: Child Right, Media Democratization, Agenda, MDGs, Nigeria

Introduction

Article 2 of Children and Young Persons Act (CYPA), enacted in Eastern, Western and Northern regions of Nigeria defines a " 'child' means (a) person under the age of fourteen, while 'young person' means a person who has attained the age of fourteen years and is under the age of seventeen years" (Jacomy and Stevens, 2004:9). In the UN Convention on

the Rights of the Child, a child is every human being below the age of eighteen years. Similarly, The Nigerian Child Rights Act (2003), passed into law in the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), defines a child as a person who has not attained the age of eighteen years. The general conception of a child then seems to limit it below 18 years of age.

According to UNICEF (2005:3), childhood means much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood; it refers to "the state and condition of a child's life: to the quality of those years". This definition of childhood is based on human rights and it is reflected in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are neither the possession of parents nor of the State, nor are they mere people-in-the-making; they have equal status as members of the human family. In other words, children have needs similar to those of adults and thus have similar rights like any other human being. Children however rely on adults for the nurture and guidance they need to grow towards independence. Such nurture is ideally found in the children's families, but when primary care-givers cannot provide children's needs, society is expected to fill the gap.

The Rights of the Child

Children's rights are claims that all children have for survival, development, protection and participation. According to the Child Development Department of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, Federal Republic of Nigeria, (1995: 5), the basic principles of Children's rights state that:

- Every child has the right to life and be allowed to survive and develop.
- Every child is entitled to a name, family and nationality.
- Every child is free to belong to any association or assembly according to the law.
- Every child has the right to express opinions and freely communicate them on any issues subject to restriction under the law.
- Every child is entitled to protection from any act that interferes with his or her privacy, honour, and reputation.
- Every child is entitled to adequate rest, recreation (leisure and play) according to his or her age and culture.
- Every child (male or female) is entitled to receive compulsory basic education and equal opportunity for higher education depending on individual ability.
- Every child is entitled to good health, protection from illness

and proper medical attention for survival, personal growth and development.

- Every child must be protected from indecent and inhuman treatment through sexual exploitation, drug abuse, child labour, torture, maltreatment and neglect.
- No child should suffer any discrimination irrespective of ethnic origin, birth, colour, sex, language, religion, political and social beliefs, status or disability.

Sustainable Human Development and Child Rights

The intergenerational nature of sustainable development makes children's rights central to it. The World Commission on Environment and Development's definition of sustainable development, as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", makes it clear that the future generation is focal to sustainable development. Hammarberg (1990:105) points out that "our children belong to the future; they are the future...Life's aspirations come in the guise of children".

Since the future generation will naturally comprise the children, empowering them to maximize the future for their own development

is very significant (Gathia, 1997). Thus, fulfilment of the rights of children is an issue in sustainable development. Besides, since human rights and sustainable development are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, it follows then that children as human beings should have their own rights also guaranteed.

The point is well emphasized by UNICEF (2006), stressing that chapter 25 of Agenda 21 of the 1992 Earth Summit is devoted to children to ensure that the development needs and rights of today's children will be met without compromising those of future generations. UNICEF also notes that central to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in its entirety is the development as well as the survival of children; this guarantees them the right to education and leisure and to special protection from abuse, neglect and all forms of exploitation which interfere with their development.

It is useful to observe that the core of the CRC is encased in Article 3, where the best interests of the child form the basic criteria by which the most critical decisions regarding children should be made. The CRC makes it clear that children are not objects of charity or welfare, but active participants

in their own lives. The conclusion drawn is that development cannot be sustainable without fulfilling the needs and rights of children who make up the future generation.

In the same vein, UNICEF emphasized that meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) requires fulfilling the rights of children. It states that six of the eight MDGs can best be met as the rights of children to health, education, protection and equality are protected. They will only be sustained as the rights of every child are realized. In explicit terms, UNICEF outlines how fulfilling children's rights meets the following six of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):

Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger: This can be met when children are cared for from their earliest years, provided with an expanded set of immunizations and basic health care and a quality primary school education. They also require to be supplied with the knowledge, skill and support they need to fight HIV/AIDS and to be protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination.

Achieve universal primary education: This will be met when children have the care from their earliest years; a quality primary school education- with a special focus on ensuring girls access and quality, which will in turn ensure the same for boys; and safe water and adequate sanitation in their schools.

Promote gender equality and empower women: Provision of quality primary school education and the knowledge, skill and support they need to fight HIV/AIDS will ensure this.

Reduce child mortality: This can be achieved when every boy/girl receives care from early life and has access to expanded set of immunizations and basic health care, as well as a quality primary school education and protection against abuse, exploitation and violence.

Improve maternal health: This will be realized when every girl and boy has an expanded set of immunizations and basic health care, a quality primary school education as well as when their mothers are healthy and well nourished before, during and after pregnancy.

Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases: To fulfill this, children must have care from their earliest years, an expanded set of immunizations and basic health care, protection against local diseases, i.e. insecticide-treated

nets to prevent mosquito-borne malaria; a quality primary school education and the knowledge, skill and support they need to fight HIV/AIDS.

One can observe the recurrence of certain requirements in the goals namely: care for children from their earliest years, quality primary school education, immunization and basic health and knowledge and skill to fight HIV/AIDS. Therefore, if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be met and sustained, we must rapidly move towards fulfilling the rights of children.

Chapter 25 of Agenda 21 of United Nations Conference on Environment and Development has also called attention to the place of Children in sustainable development (United Nations, 1992). It noted that children will not only inherit the responsibility of looking after the earth, but in many developing countries they comprise nearly half the population. Furthermore, children in both developing and industrialized countries are highly vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation. The specific interests of children therefore need to be taken fully into account in the participatory process on environment and development in order to safeguard

the future sustainability of any action taken to improve the environment.

To this end, governments should take measures to:

A. Ensure the survival, protection and development of children, in accordance with the goals endorsed by the 1990 World Summit for Children;

B. Ensure that the interests of children are taken fully into account in the participatory process for sustainable development and environmental improvement.

For the governments to do these, they should take active steps to:

a) Implement programmes for children designed to reach the child-related goals of the 1990s in the areas of environment and development, especially health, nutrition, education, literacy and poverty alleviation;

b) Ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, annex), at the earliest moment and implement it by addressing the basic needs of youth and children;

c) Promote primary environmental care activities that address the basic needs of communities, improve the

environment for children at the household and community level and encourage the participation and empowerment of local populations, including women, youth, children and indigenous people, towards the objective of integrated community management of resources, especially in developing countries;

d) Expand educational opportunities for children and youth, including education for environmental and developmental responsibility, with overriding attention to the education of the girl child;

e) Mobilize communities through schools and local health centres so that children and their parents become effective focal points for sensitization of communities to environmental issues;

f) Establish procedures to incorporate children's concerns into all relevant policies and strategies for environment and development at the local, regional and national levels, including those concerning allocation of and entitlement to natural resources, housing and recreation needs, and control of pollution and toxicity in both rural and urban areas.

The Role of the Media

While communication is central to development, the media of mass communication play active role in that process because of their efficiency in information dissemination. Melkote and Steeves (2001) noted that mass media play the role of a catalyst to bring about change in development process. Deane et al (2002) state that the mass media are fundamental to development. The mass media enable people to learn about issues as well as make their voices heard. They can exert a powerful influence, for good or for ill. Free, independent media are important to ensure freedom of speech (guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), promote democracy, good governance, peace and human rights, combat poverty and crime, inform people about issues and enable them to participate in public debate.

Okigbo (1991) notes that the print media can contribute to development by disseminating truth and useful information, correlating the parts of society and sensitizing (or conscientizing) the people to the need for planned development and social change. Other important functions of the print media in development process are persuasion, motivation, providing learning materials and appropriate

development information for educated members of the society.

Media also shape public opinion and influence public policy. **Graves (2007), citing** Jaime Abello Banfi, **notes that** media are used to give voice to marginalized groups, such as women and ethnic and religious minorities, as well as to promote their rights. In Burundi, for example, the association BonSem produces a weekly radio show and publishes a newsletter designed to encourage discussion about how civil society can work for the political and economic inclusion of the marginalized Twa communities. Similarly, according to Panos London's 2007 report *At the Heart of Change*, information and the media that deliver it are powerful agents of change that can help reduce poverty and the debilitating efforts of disease in the developing world. Sustainable development demands that people participate in the debates and decisions that affect their lives. They need to be able to receive information, and also to make their voices heard. The social impact of media includes improving the quality of education, informing the public about health threats and safe practices to avoid them, serving local communities by bringing attention to their needs, and in times of disaster, providing information and sources of assistance to people displaced from their homes **(Graves, 2007).**

In pursuance of the child rights agenda, series of international, regional and national conferences have been held, leading to declarations, resolutions and charters on the rights of the child. The first attempt to bring issues affecting children to the fore was the 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child. This was followed by the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the proclamation of 1979 as the International Year of the Child by the United Nations. The 1979 proclamation was meant to increase levels of knowledge concerning children's rights, to present examples where the position of children had been improved, and fix particular attention on the tragic condition of children in developing countries, primarily levels of infant and child mortality in Africa. But the most notable event about children was the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by UN General Assembly resolution 44/25 of November 20, 1989. It became effective on September 2, 1990. About 191 countries have since ratified it (UNICEF, 2002). The Convention has produced a profound change with substantive

effects on the world's attitude towards children. Nigeria ratified the Convention on April 19, 1991and thus came under obligation to fulfil the requirements and dictates it contains in respect of the child. Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child were other conferences such as the Asia Summit on Child Rights and the Media (1996), the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (1996), the First All African Summit (1997), the Second World Summit on Television for Children (1998), the Oslo Challenge (1999), the West African Regional Summit on Media for Children (2000) etc. Most of these conferences stressed the role of the media in the realisation of the goals set in the UN Convention **on the Rights of the Child**.

Article 17 of the Convention on the rights of the child specifies the role the media should play in the promotion and protection of children's rights (UNICEF 2002:65-66). The Article states that:

> *States Parties shall recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:*
> *(a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;*
> *(b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;*
> *(c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;*
> *(d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;*
> *(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the*

child from information and material injurious to his or her well being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18 (UNICEF 2002:65-66).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (1996) believes that the media-both written and audio visual- are highly important in efforts to make reality the principles and standards of the Convention. The media can play a pivotal role in monitoring the actual implementation of the rights of the child.

The media are powerful because they penetrate every segment of modern-day society and effectively influence how people view themselves, their neighbours, their communities and their world. Media representations are the primary source of information on social problems for many people (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994). Maley (2000: 37) for instance notes that: "In social and cultural matters, the various media provide the main platforms of debate, and their choices of subjects, participants and opinions shape the agenda and much of its content." The media play a significant role in forming and influencing people's attitudes and behaviour (Brawley, 1995).

Goddard and Saunders (2001),

draw attention to the essential role of the media in increasing the society's awareness of, and response to, child abuse and neglect. News and features could be used to report child abuse cases, research and intervention strategies. Such media attention to child abuse can positively influence public opinion, professional and political responses to the circumstances in which children and young people find themselves. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987:3) observe that journalists play a major role in constructing what is considered "deviant" in our society and, therefore, what is "normal". Journalists do not merely reflect the work of others who define deviance and attempt to control it, but are themselves in some ways agents of social control; they are "a kind of deviance defining elite" who articulate the "proper bounds to behaviour" in our society.

In addition to news stories, feature articles and investigative journalism, sporadic mass media education and prevention campaigns could be launched. These campaigns will broaden community's knowledge of child abuse and neglect, influence people's attitudes towards children and young people and change behaviours that contribute to, or precipitate the problem of child abuse and neglect

in our communities. Though it has been argued that complex attitudinal or behavioural change requires more direct forms of citizen contact and intervention, the media at least are effective in building citizen awareness of an issue (Saunders and Goddard, 2002; Reger, Wootan and Booth-Butterfield, 2000; Freimuth, Cole and Kirby 2001). Besides, mass media campaigns and coverage of the rights of children perform a significant role in placing the relevant issues on the public and political agenda. Lindsey (1994:163) also asserts that: "media has a central role in mediating information and forming public opinion. The media casts an eye on events that few of us directly experience and renders remote happenings observable and meaningful".

Parajuli (2004) also notes that children are the future of a country and must be provided with education, socialized, motivated and equipped with all the basic necessities for their personality development. He adds that media can bring forth children's issues by allowing children who have been working (in the worst form such) as domestic servants, on the streets, in factories and mines/quarries as well as those rehabilitated from any organization to participate in their media programme. In this connection, rights of the children like education, health, communication, participation, physical and moral support are some of the major components for their well-being. So, the media have to raise the awareness of children's situation to the concerned NGOs or government. In other words, mass media education and child rights campaigns present one means of breaking cycles of suppression and denial.

Democratizing the Media
In order for the media to effectively perform these roles, there is need for a complete overhaul of the current media structures. The highly centralized and commercialized media system currently in vogue in Nigeria cannot deliver the demands of the rights of the child. Though, the Nigerian media system became fully liberalized following the deregulation of broadcasting since the 1990s, it has not, in anyway, ensured democratization and localization- which are key factors to ensuring media responsiveness to the rights of the child. As at present, there is not a single community radio in Nigeria.

The private stations, both radio and television are commercial-oriented, elitist and foreign in content. Their programmes are geared towards entertainment so

as to beat competition. The reason for this is not far-fetched; they need to succeed as a business. Even their so-called children's programmes are simply entertainment as opposed to informative and edutainment programmes. Children's parties have become dominant features of our television programmes; these programmes are usually sponsored by companies whose motive is to expand the market of their children-targeted products rather than popularizing the rights of the child.

For the media to be better placed, the media structure must move beyond mere liberalization to being localized and democratized. There is need for local media that will reach people at the grassroots. Kasoma (1991) noted that local media are veritable means of social change at the local level. Similarly, community radio stations must be approved in order to meet the communication needs of people at local level. It is necessary to note that the key participants concerned with children's rights are women, children themselves and teachers at the community levels. These people need to know about the rights of a child, what the convention on the right of the children is all about and what role they can play in fulfilling child rights. This can only be achieved if

local media are effectively engaged to communicate these to them.

Popularizing the content of the Convention of the Rights of a Child is crucial at this point. Radio stations especially, are in better position to get this done. Explaining the contents of the right of the child will spur the key participants to take the issues that surround it seriously. When children themselves know their rights, they can make demands for those rights to be fulfilled. Effective popularization of those rights will require that the radio communicates in the language that the people can understand, that is, their indigenous languages.

Television stations also need to brace up in production of programes that are of social benefits to children. If the televisions must contribute significantly to the growth of children, they must produce age appropriate educational and informational programmes that can aid their mental and social development. During adolescence and early teenage years, children develop a sense of identity from their parents and the family unit. Children at this stage use the media more than younger children as they pursue their interests in music, film, magazines and online activities. Their interaction

with the mass media exposes them to various social definitions of acceptable behaviours, identity and roles. Adolescents see characters in the media play different roles, get rewarded or punished for certain behaviours, express and affirm various values and engage in social interaction. These media characters, stars, and celebrities serve as role models that adolescents identify with and tend to emulate. With locally produced programmes, children stand a better chance of finding media characters with similar cultural values to identify with (Osei-Hwere, 2008).

Moreover, it will also be necessary for government and media regulating bodies to initiate policies that will compel the media to give attention to popularizing child rights. If every hand must be on deck in realizing the Millennium Development Goals, the media must actively play their roles. It is against this backdrop that regulators must ensure that the media contribute their own quota.

Conclusion

The challege of meeting the MDGs is such an enormous one. But it is very clear, as pointed out by UNICEF, that fulfilling the rights of the child is an indirect way of meeting those goals. There is therefore availability of great

possibilities through the **media in** popularizing the right**s of children and mobilizing everyone** concerned in achieving **these lofty** goals. Getting the **media** democratized so as **to allow** pluralisation of local **media is** central to making the **rights of the** child known and placing **them on** the public agenda. It is **when this** is done that we can be **talking of** meeting the Millennium **goals.**

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