

Institutionalizing PRSPs: The Role of the Media

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Introduction

Information is key to building informed strategies to fight poverty. Effective media are essential for a functioning democracy and for the development of sound economies.

Communication flows in the PRSP process, as in all aspects of social, economic and political life, are most effective when there is a two-way flow—messages sent out and messages heard. The design and implementation of PRSPs require information outflows, together with steady feedback to help monitor and evaluate progress.

The discussion revealed a very important conclusion: the issues that confront the media in support of poverty reduction could not be separated from more general issues that arise in the development of a strong and effective media. This is particularly true in the CIS-7 countries which are just beginning to build the traditions and practices of independent media.

Problems

Some of the key problems that confronted the media include:

- A lack of financial **independence**--sponsorship by commercial interests or state support—compromises editorial independence;
- Journalists suffer from a **lack of training**—especially in more complex economic and social issues;
- The absence of a well-established **code of ethics or code of conduct** to build trust between the media, their audiences, and sources of information.
- **Lack of access to information**; while there is a steady improvement, government and private agencies are not yet willing or able to meet the demand for information;
- The existence of various forms of **censorship**—direct or, more commonly, self-censorship.
- More specific to poverty reduction, **cost and literacy levels** limit poor people's access to the media; TV and computer-based communication are prohibitively expensive; and newspapers are likely to be beyond the means of poor people.
- Poverty reduction issues may not sell newspapers: a financially independent press will make decisions about content based on what appeals to its audience.

Achievements

Despite these constraints the media have come a long way in recent years. Indeed, in economic and financial journalism there tends to be greater freedom and higher quality. Participants were able to identify ways in which the media was contributing to better economic policy making and poverty reduction.

The economic press in Kazakhstan has improved and expanded its coverage, and in several instances has helped illuminate shortcomings or unintended consequences of specific policies, leading the government to seek alternative policies or make mid-course adjustments to existing ones.

Moldovan radio has actually gotten involved in raising funds to support families affected by HIV/AIDS. In the Kyrgyz republic, the press was identified not only as a chronicler of the PRSP process but a stakeholder and actor in the process. However, when the media become stakeholders in the policy process, there may be questions of compromised independence.. Still, the media have helped to identify areas or regions of countries where poverty is particularly acute, by reporting based on their own investigation. This may prompt the government to improve its own information gathering.

Needs and proposals

Several areas need attention:

- Training for journalists, especially in economic and financial issues;
- The evolution in each country of codes of ethics and conduct;
- Progressively loosening the constraints of censorship and self-censorship;
- The development of economically viable news organizations, which is likely to happen only gradually given the economic and financial constraints facing the countries generally.
- For promoting poverty reduction, alternative forms of communication are needed—such as bulletin boards, community theatre, or low cost local newspapers.

Many of these issues are not unique to the media, and will be resolved as part of the emergence of a culture of openness, transparency, and accountability in all corners of society—government, the judicial system, business, and civil society.