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THEME: THE GPRS AND MULTI-DONOR BUDGET
SUPPORT
STRENGTHENING THE LINES OF ACCOUNTABILITY
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THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA – DR. AUDREY GADZEKPO

In addressing this topic I will begin by stating the obvious: It is beyond the media to reduce poverty, and beyond media to ensure that programs put in place by governments and development partners to reduce poverty, and bring about development are carried out. But I believe that the media in Ghana can play a more robust role in ensuring accountability in development processes and in development programs, such as the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Noble Prizewinner Amartya Sen is widely quoted for saying that he is yet to come across a country with a free press that has experienced a famine. The reason? A free press, or better still, free media act as early warning signals, alerting governments when there are problem areas and impending disasters. Our Constitution guarantees us free media and, since we became a constitutional democracy, our evolving political culture has respected that.

In discussions such as this the media's watchdog role is often highlighted. I think that a more accountable and development oriented way of looking at the role of the media is in terms of them playing an inspector general role to the entire socio-political system. This means the media must among other things: provide economic information; indeed, provide information and data about even the ordinary; reward innovation; make sure public pronouncements are translated into public actions; provide a sense of cause and effect; provide a forum for public discussion; cooperate in building new institutions, and of course, provide scope for controversy.

By playing the inspector general role the media can provide the necessary public criticism to ensure some degree of integrity among power holders and officials (Pye, 1963). Of course we must concede that reckless and irresponsible criticism of government and public institutions can retard development and undermine people's confidence in their leaders and institutions. But it is equally harmful to allow the media to become mere apologists for government and government programs. We can take a cue from the past. The test of the maturity of the media in Ghana must therefore be their ability to balance the demands of their inspector general role. And if I may quote Lucian Pye (1963) on this:

“This role calls for a balance between a normal role, that of objective and free criticism and a dynamic role, that of inspiring change and influencing the minds of a transitional people” (Pye, 1963: 38).

It is the desire for such a balance that underpins much of my comments here today. The inspector general role of the media implies that they must focus attention on the GPRS; they must point out opportunities within the GPRS; influence the climate of opinion about the program, as well as attack indifferences or obstructions that come in the way of its implementation.

One of the goals of development, and consequently part of the poverty reduction strategy, must be to adequately inform citizens about government policies, and development goals to enable them exercise their responsibilities. The easiest, feasible way of achieving this goal is through the media. Therefore the media ought to assume a supporting and participatory role in ensuring that citizens not only get information about the GPRS but also derive maximum benefit from the GPRS and donor budgetary support. Even though we now live in a pluralistic media environment in Ghana, the mass of people live where media is thin on the ground because the press is very urban-based and also urban-biased. Is there a way we can narrow the differential density of media between urban and rural? Is there a way we can increase the flow of information in media-poor areas?

In the context of these discussions there are perhaps even more fundamental questions that must be posed as well. How much do the media know about the GPRS; how well do they understand the aims, objectives and conditionalities contained in the strategy; what are their perceptions of the strategy; and what are their positions on the strategy? The discharge of media’s accountability duties will be predicated on the answers to these questions, for how can they compel accountability when they do not know what ought to be accounted for?

Challenges

Taking a cursory look at the quantum of news and information in the media since the GPRS was launched, it is clear that this is not a “big story.”

The low level of media interest in the GPRS, suggests those responsible for implementation must double their efforts at providing information to the media. Information must be provided in a manner that makes it easy for the media to digest and understand what is going on. A more proactive, not reactive approach to information dissemination is required if we want to interest media in the GPRS agenda. One of the roles of the media is to set the agenda for public discussion of issues they consider important. With the exception of one or two newspapers, it looks like the GPRS is not on the media agenda.

Proactivism on the part of policy implementers calls for accessible and quick response to media and media needs, even if sometimes media may appear obnoxious. A display of

ignorance on the part of journalists must be regarded not as vexatious but as an opportunity to educate and better inform.

Finally as far as implementers of the program are concerned, there must be recognition that media can only play a role in strengthening the links of accountability if they have the capacity to do so. Are the media in Ghana adequately trained and resourced to constantly monitor and report?

What must the media itself do to foster accountability in the poverty reduction program?

They must set the agenda for robust discussion of the merits and demerits of the program, the levels of donor support, the conditions that have been negotiated between our government and development partners, the beneficiaries of the program, etc. It is true that traditional news values play a role in deciding what gets in the news, and traditionally news values such as controversy and conflict have been what are privileged. Stories of conflicts, of disagreements, dissent, polarizations between political parties and personalities, and scandals, are what get reported. It is futile to get the media to abandon a formula that they are convinced serves them well. The Ghanaian media, like other media around the world has an agenda beyond the instrumentalist agenda of “the public good.” But the media must try and build the capacity for other kinds of stories and strike a balance between stories of controversy and stories of development.

The media must build the kind of capacity that would make them more effective inspectors general of development programs. Currently, the media is still weak at information gathering, partly because many do not have and cannot afford the adequate numbers and quality of staff required to do the kinds of stories that track programs such as this; partly because journalists are not very skilled at getting the right kind of information they need for their stories and partly because the information environment itself is unfriendly. Those with information are reluctant to give it and where there should be information it is either not there or easily retrievable. Yet information is crucial in strengthening links of accountability.

The media must also address weaknesses in interpreting and packaging information, particularly technical information. This is partly why I said earlier that those in charge of information dissemination on the GPRS ought to make the information accessible and easily digestible. It is important that journalists understand the complex factors that often underpin matters relating to financing and development, for example and reflect them in their reports so that the public can better understand what is at stake beyond the superficial. One of the biggest problems the media have is that of politicization, personalization and infantilization of issues. The media must transcend these tendencies. They must background stories to help readers and listeners better put issues in perspective; and they must go beyond basic news stories to do more interpretative stories that draw out implications of certain actions in a way that ordinary people can understand and then act on.

More importantly, the media must themselves be accountable by sticking to the facts and getting the facts straight, being fair and ethical in their approach so as not to confuse issues, and balancing different and conflicting interests by presenting all sides to an issue.

In conclusion let me say that in a democracy, the media are widely regarded as surrogates for the citizens, providing information necessary in order that citizens can make valid and reliable decisions. They are also one of few institutions outside government that have structural rights and therefore collectively, are an important institution of horizontal accountability. In many ways the media already help in ensuring accountability by bringing to light wrong doings on the part of public officials and from time to time pointing out lapses in the system. The media has been instrumental in expanding the public voice by giving space and airtime to citizens who have grievances or comments, or contributions to make. Both print and electronic media have acted as a public forum for the discussion of all manner of important national issues. This link between the public voice and the media must be strengthened and refined. The strengthening of the links of accountability rests not only on the media alone, but also on every member of society. The challenge for the media, however, is to make it possible for people to demand accountability and compel accountability. And this challenge can only be met if the media do a good job of monitoring the GPRS; informing citizens about the it and setting the right tone for a much better and more robust discussion on the progress and implementation of the program.