

Media as a Tool for Empowering the Rural Populace of Zimbabwe towards Understanding Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset)

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-----ABSTRACT-----

In 2013 the government of Zimbabwe embarked on an economic growth and wealth creation plan known as the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset). This is supposed to be an inclusive plan benefiting all Zimbabweans. However, people living in rural areas may not be aware of Zim Asset due to a hiatus in information on this plan in rural areas. The study explored how media can be used to sensitise people in rural areas about Zim Asset. The research was informed by a constructivist philosophy which argues that knowledge and meaning are generated from an interaction between researchers and participants. A qualitative research methodology was employed for the study as it is appropriate when one does not need manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study. A case study research design was used as it enabled a detailed and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because of the need to identify data rich sources. Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were used for data generation. The trustworthiness of the data was established through triangulation of data sources and data generation techniques, recording of interviews and Focus Group Discussions proceedings, transcribing and member checking. data analysis we used thematic content analysis. Major findings were that media have the potential to educate people living in Zimbabwe's about Zim Asset. However, for this ideal to be realized, a number of challenges and policy issues need to be addressed.

KEYWORDS : Media, Zim Asset, Empowerment, Rural Populace.

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I. Introduction

The government of Zimbabwe formulated an economic recovery plan where quick results are expected between October 2013 and December 2018. The economic blue-print known as the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset) is expected to guide national development over its five year term. The Zim Asset plan if implemented it touches on the most important aspects that will help improve the Zimbabwean economy. Zim Asset aims to increase productivity, competitiveness and to improve the business environment as a whole (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013).

Zimbabwean citizens are expected to understand what Zim Asset entails so that they can benefit from it. A strategy without effective implementation will remain but just a strategy. We assumed that a greater percentage of the population of Zimbabwe live in the rural areas where there is little or no access to the media. We are of the view that the media if used effectively can play a pivotal role of information dissemination to people in rural areas about Zim Asset. It is the right of every individual regardless of race, gender, class or background to have the right to information, in this case through the media. The constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees the right to information (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013).

While all the country's economic activities should mirror ZimAsset, a gap exists between the economic blue-print and its implementation. Therefore the purpose of this study was to explore the possibilities of using the media to empower people in rural areas so that they can also benefit from Zim Asset. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How knowledgeable are people in rural areas about ZimAsset?
- 2) How feasible is the use of media in empowering people living in rural areas about Zim Asset?
- 3) What are the challenges of using media to empower people living in rural areas?
- 4) How can the challenges of using the media be circumvented?

We proceeded with the assumption that the media could play a pivotal role in operationalising and demystifying ZimAsset among Zimbabweans, especially those living in rural and other remote areas.

II. Background to the problem

The illegal economic sanctions imposed by the Western countries led to a deteriorating economic and social environment in Zimbabwe. In order to resuscitate the economy, the government of Zimbabwe formulated a recovery plan known as Zim Asset. The recovery plan was meant to run from October 2013 – December 2018. This is a Results Based Agenda which is built around the following four strategic clusters:

- Food Security and Nutrition;
- Social Services and Poverty Eradication;
- Infrastructure and Utilities; and
- Value Addition and Beneficiation. (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013).

One of the key strategies for the implementation of the plan is: Availing and increasing economic opportunities for women, youths and the physically challenged in communities in conformity with the Indigenisation, Empowerment and Employment Creation thrust. Our assumption is that if this group of people is to benefit from Zim Asset it should be educated on what Zim Asset is as well as how the group can benefit from it. This being the case, our aim was to explore the feasibility of using the media to sensitise people living in rural areas about Zim Asset so that they can also fully benefit from the plan.

III. Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by the Democratic Participant Media Theory which is one of the normative theories of the media which emphasizes and supports the media multiplicity, local nature of the media, horizontal media involvement and interaction. The theory is mainly concerned with the right of every person to information, the right to reply, the right to use the means of communication for interaction in small scale settings of interest groups, sub-culture and community. According to Kwaramba 2000 the Democratic Participant Media Theory is very effective in that it guarantees some channels for feedback and an opportunity for often neglected local communities to express their opinions and views on issues of interest to them.

IV. Functions of the media

The media has a strong social, cultural and political impact upon society and can play an effective role to bring positive change in society. We are of the opinion that the traditional roles of the media are to inform, educate and entertain people through various types of media which include radio, television and newspapers. The role of the media in disseminating information has become increasingly more important. Media can be used as a tool to empower human beings including people staying in rural areas

Media literacy in both journalists as well as the public is important so as to have a smooth flow of interactive communication. Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (Hobbs, 1998). In disseminating information the media must ensure that the channel through which the message is sent as well as the target audience enable comprehension of the message by the intended beneficiaries.

It is the function of the nation's communication media to weld the entire community into a single entity, a people of the same mind and possessed of the same determination to safeguard the national interest (Lamb, 1986). Characteristics of communication channels worthy of note, according to (Rogers 1986), are: message flow, source knowledge of the audience, segmentation, degree of interactivity, feedback, asynchronicity, socioemotional vs. task-related content, nonverbal, control of the communication flow, and privacy afforded. He charted these characteristics across face-to-face interpersonal communication, interactive (machine-assisted interpersonal) communication, and mass media.

V. Media coverage in rural areas

According to Nwanko and Ochen, (2012) the Nigerian media have often ignored the rural areas by reporting on what is taking place in the urban areas. When the journalists write about the rural communities they do so from the urban perspective. The hardships faced by people in rural areas are not reported in the media. Chester and Neelameghan, (2000) observed that most people in African countries reside in the rural areas where their needs are not adequately met. They have not been given an opportunity to partake in developmental projects where they are supposed to benefit from. The kind of information that the rural people are exposed to through the media is very much system oriented in such a way that they fail to interpret the media messages, as a result they do not understand or benefit from media messages (Kamba, 2009). The rural people live in information deserted areas yet information on government policies such as Zim Asset should also reach them.

In our view if rural people are to understand the information passed on to them through the media there is need to take issues of language and ethical issues seriously. Journalists have to know that there is language for specific purposes and that to make communication effective, journalists have to take note of the level of

education of their target audiences. For developmental purposes it is vital that there is information dissemination to everyone from all parts of the country. According to Nyerere (1967), he stated that the most important goal is to reach people living in rural areas by empowering them on what is happening and how they can develop themselves and the country as a whole.

From observations we found out that in Zimbabwe the media does not have enough coverage especially in the rural areas as the journalists live and work in urban areas. Many a times journalists get news about rural areas from government departments, district officers or opinion leaders. We are of the view that journalists do not have an interpersonal or intergroup communication with rural folks themselves. On rare instances the village chiefs might be interviewed but this normally occurs when there are strange things happening such as ritual sacrifices, community clashes, rape, murder and other stories they regard as newsworthy. Important messages about government policies and information relevant for policy making and development are usually disseminated to the citizens by the government through the media. Citizens ought to be afforded an opportunity to dialogue with and also engage policy makers on developmental issues (Librero, 1985).

Research information has been prepared and disseminated to rural audiences in Uganda through the following ways: on farm visits; on-the spot advice; village meetings for information and demonstration; radio programmes in several local languages; television programmes in English simplified, illustrated brochures in mainly three local languages and well-illustrated films (Nakabugu, 2014). Political, social and economic development of a country can only be realized when the communication system is vibrant. (Rennie, 2006).

VI. Radio as the medium for Africa

Due to the difference in distribution and consumption of media messages, the impact of media differs between rural and urban areas. Since the villagers are mostly illiterate, the radio is the only medium through which they are being informed about the nation and the world at large. Radio is a complimentary component in promoting agriculture and rural development as it is the most effective medium in rural areas. Community participation is vital for radio to succeed as a medium of communication (Rennie 2006). The proliferation of media and new technological tools such as the advent of mobile phones has created an information rich rural society where people from the rural areas can now access radio using their mobile phones at any time.

According to (Rennie 2006), there are at least three reasons why the radio is the only meaningful medium in Africa. Firstly, almost everyone has a receiver on which to listen to the radio especially in rural areas. Secondly, since there are a few newspapers distributed outside the cities radio is the most ideal medium for people in the rural areas. Thirdly, poor road network makes it impossible for newspapers to reach all parts of the country.

Importance of community media for rural development

Community media exists to enhance community participation with a view to bring some transformation in society/community (Liverouw, 2011). As illustrated by Liverouw (2011) alternative goal is to create a diverse media space in which any and all voices can be heard and where anytime may contribute.

Research has shown that the advent of community radio in South Africa lived up to the expectation as a tool for seeking liberation and development of the excluded black race and South Africa as a whole (Osunkunle, 2008) In places where freedom of speech was restricted, community radio was chosen as a way of giving a voice to the voiceless or those who were silenced and to help make information available to them.

Challenges of relying on the media as a tool for empowering people living in rural areas.

The reality is that media in Africa is faced with challenges of poor infrastructure, lack of equipment as well as lack of professionals who are experts in rural reporting. Lack of training in journalistic skills may lead to a lack of inquiring mind required for good reporting. There is no investigative reporting especially in Africa as it is time consuming and expensive () People living in rural areas may not be willing to disclose all the information to journalists as they might be suspicious and generally do not trust them as they will have just descended upon their village to extract information.()

The propaganda model that was propounded by Herman and Chomsky (1988) is a powerful reminder that the mainstream media are a crucial tool for legitimizing the ideas of the most powerful social factors and for securing consent for their actions. Herman and Chomsky came up with five filters of propaganda which are Ownership of the media, Advertising, Sourcing, Flak as well as Anti- communism as an ideology. Ownership affects the way the media operates. If the media is owned by the government it is most likely to perpetuate the ideologies of the government and usually the rural people are not given enough coverage. In most African countries the media is mostly owned by the state which is said to be playing a watchdog role. The state media tends to conceal the corrupt activities by government officials (Hyden, Leslie and Ogundimu, 2003).

The media gets most of its revenue from advertising therefore it is forced to disseminate information for advertisers and if they fail to do so advertisers withdraw their licence. Most African countries inherited media

laws from their colonial masters, as a result most of these laws are said to be draconian because they inhibit freedom of expression which is guaranteed in the constitution of most African countries (Oetle, 2013). For dialogue to be effective people in the rural areas prefer to read documents written in indigenous languages they understand rather than interpreting policies or documents written in English which has led to the Englishness of culture through cultural imperialism especially in developing countries where people uphold the western culture in favour of their traditional culture. Zimbabwean people in rural areas only have access to the media which is the most popular among them. However due to language barrier most of them only listen to Radio Zimbabwe and National FM radio stations in Zimbabwe.

VII. Research Methodology

We used the qualitative methodology which was informed by the constructivist philosophy. A case study design was adopted. The purposively sampled participants were journalists from both electronic and print media organisations consisting of researchers, reporters and editors. Data were generated through Focus Group Discussions with people living in rural areas including village chiefs and district officers. Data saturation was reached after three Focus Group Discussions. The composition of Focus Groups was as follows: Focus Group 1 was composed of 8 people 4 men and 4 women. Focus Group 2 had 10 participants – 4 men and 6 women while the third group had 9 participants, 5 men and 4 women. We ensured that there were no married couples in the Focus Groups. We opted for the use of FGDs because not much is known about the phenomenon under discussion so we were of the opinion that more useful data could be generated through Focus Group Discussions. We were also aware that some participants could withhold their contributions maybe because of shyness or not being comfortable to air their views on an issue they know very little about. To circumvent this, we tried to make the groups as homogeneous as possible through the use of snowball sampling. We also encouraged participation by explaining that every contribution is very useful and that no contribution is incorrect.

We also conducted interviews with the following individuals² village chiefs, 1 area manager and 1 station manager. This was meant to increase trustworthiness of the findings. The thematic content analysis approach that was used in this study was preceded by transcription of Focus Group Discussion and interview proceedings, member checking, segmenting, coding and enumeration.

VIII. Findings and Discussions

Knowledge of people in rural areas about Zim Asset.

We found out that most people in the rural areas were not aware of Zim Asset. Most people in rural areas did not have any slightest idea that showed that they knew anything about the plan. Those who had a slight idea about what Zim Asset was could not further elaborate what they understood about Zim Asset. These were mainly people who lived in district centres who regularly talked to the people from the cities who might have hinted on Zim Asset but they failed to explain the meaning of Zim Asset and its benefits.

From the investigation that we did it is clear that the Zim Asset plan has not been brought to all communities in Zimbabwe especially in the rural areas. People living in rural areas wondered if the plan was meant for them as well or it was meant for the urban dwellers. Our findings are consistent with Nwanko and Ochen's (2012) observations. This knowledge gap means that people living in rural areas may be left out of Zim Asset driven development programmes as argued by Chester and Neelameghan (2000) and Kamba (2009).

The feasibility of using the media in empowering people living in rural areas about ZimAsset.

Most participants confirmed that they radios and cellphones with radio functions. Therefore it is highly feasible to use the radio to educate people living in rural areas about Zim Asset. Our assumption is based on the traditional roles of the media which are to inform, educate as well as to entertain. If the media is used decisively in all parts of Zimbabwean rural areas people will be able to understand apparently what Zim Asset entails and how they can benefit from it. The media must ensure that there is fair coverage of news in both rural and urban areas for developmental purposes. Most participants were in accord that media can be used to empower people living in rural areas. For this to be feasible they suggested that:

- Rural reporting ought to be developed in Zimbabwe as this will enable people living in rural areas to be represented in the media. Rural reporting will have to ensure that no urban journalist reports about what is happening in the rural areas, instead a journalist based in the rural areas who knows the language of the people, their lifestyle as well as what is happening in that particular area where he or she resides is a suitable personnel to report about people who live in rural areas.
- Journalist should avoid the remote control kind of journalism or the desktop journalism where everything happens from the comfort of their own desks.
- If the media uses local languages people in the rural areas will be able to understand Zim Asset. While it is understood that most Zimbabweans are literate it is not necessarily true because being literate may mean that you are able to count and you can know how much money you have in your pocket, it may

not exactly mean that you are capable of reading English language and understand it in a manner that it is supposed to be.

- While Zimbabwean National Fm radio and radio Zimbabwe can be commended for making use of local languages such as Shona, Ndebele, Tonga Chewa, Sesotho and Venda among other languages, some of these languages such as Tonga and Venda are considered as minority as they do not receive enough coverage in the media. Of all the Zimbabwean newspapers none is written in the so called minority languages. Very few newspapers such as Kwaedza and Umthunywa publish in local languages. Even the recently licenced newspapers and radio station use English as their mode of delivery. These issues should be attended to make it feasible to empower people living in rural areas through the media.

Challenges of using the media to empower people in the rural areas

While a number of challenges were raised by participants, the following resonated in FGDs as well as in interviews:

- Low levels of education in journalists lead to lack of expertise in developmental issues. Some journalists do not have the required skills to be able to come up with good reporting that is necessary for people to understand the messages being disseminated to them. It is important that they do courses related to journalism, media studies, and mass communication so as to deliver the right information packaged in the right way for easy comprehension of messages by their targeted audiences.
- Most journalists in Zimbabwe do not have areas of specialization where they are expected to be fluent and accurate in a particular type of news reporting. They are expected to understand technical information so that they can translate it to people living in rural areas so that it becomes meaningful to them and that they are able to benefit from policies such as Zim Asset.
- In the rural areas there is no well-equipped, well trained and well oriented press that is expected to cover rural issues and people living in the rural areas. Journalists often cover rural areas when a unique incident befalls that particular area such as witchcraft and supernatural powers.
- There is poor media reach in the rural areas which many a times results in loss of transmission and poor message comprehension. Access to the media is very cumbersome and where it is accessible most people in the rural areas spend most of their times busy with farm work therefore the radio becomes the most ideal medium to be used as they can listen to it while performing their duties.
- Due to language barrier most people in the rural areas choose to listen to Radio Zimbabwe and National FM radio stations where they are able to relate to what is being broadcasted in their local languages.
- Lack of infrastructural development where there are poor road networks, poor recording equipment and in some places there is no transport to the rural areas which makes it difficult for journalists to reach the rural areas.
- In Zimbabwe there is no investigative journalism which is considered to be one of the most important types of journalism for empowering people. The reason for its non-availability is that it is considered expensive and time consuming.
- Zimbabwean journalism is faced by a challenge of brown envelope syndrome which is a term widely used by Nigerian commentators reporting on the corrupt activities by journalists who are not paid their salaries therefore they resort to bribery where there is cash for news reports. The future of journalism is slowly becoming threatened as a result of corrupt activities by journalists to earn a living by accepting gratifications for news sources, a situation which is unethical in the practice of journalism.

Ways of circumventing the challenges of using the media.

Most participants suggested that:

- For communication to be effective in rural areas it is important that the media houses take note of the type of language used which must be simple and straight to the point, most preferably the language that is spoken by the rural communities. Messages have to be understood by using the most appropriate medium for communication.
- Pictorial presentations appeal more to the people who are unable to read or write especially any piece of work written in English. Pictures, posters, banners, wall paintings as well as post cards will aid an understanding of such abstract policies such as Zim Asset. Folk theatres must also be used in the media as ways of educating and empowering the rural populace of Zimbabwe towards understanding Zim Asset.
- Qualified journalists with areas of specialization must be employed so as to be able to deal with news reports for people living in rural areas. There is need for seminars, workshops and some refresher courses for journalists to make sure that they are thoroughly equipped to perform their duties well.

- There is need for the media to offer more space for radio, television as well as newspapers in local languages for the benefit of all the people especially the majority of people who live in remote areas. Policies such as the Zim Asset can be easily understood by rural communities especially when written in their indigenous languages.
- Community newspapers ought to be supported by traditional media such as banners, flyers and additional information written in local languages for the benefit of almost everyone in the rural areas. Traditional media is more effective among people in the rural areas.
- There must be better living conditions for journalists in the rural areas so as to enable them to carry out their duties effectively and efficiently. Reporters must be staying in a particular community and be able to relate to the people and be having a deep insight of the problems a community is facing. It is important that people must not underestimate communication targeting rural areas.
- There is need for journalists to be well paid so as to avoid unethical journalism practices such as the brown envelope syndrome.
- Roads, postal services as well as telecommunications facilities to be improved especially in the rural areas for easy access to the media.

IX. Conclusions

From the above findings the following serve as conclusions:

- Rural reporting in Zimbabwe is still at its infancy as evidenced by lack of coverage by the media in most rural areas.
- The media is actively involved in reporting on what is happening in the urban areas.
- The radio has the potential of reaching a large number of people in the rural areas.
- Local languages do not have enough coverage in the media.
- All other things being equal, media has the potential to enhance the understanding of government policies and programmes such as Zim Asset by people living in rural areas.

Recommendations

Basing on the above conclusions, we recommend that:

- The media must play an active role in promoting rural development.
- Media houses must ensure that local languages are used as their mode of communication for the benefit of most people who live in the rural areas.
- There is need to train journalists while based in rural environments, even when it comes to internships they have to be in a rural setup so as to be well equipped right from the beginning for rural reporting.
- The media must engage policy-makers in talk-shows in simplifying enacted policies or laws in indigenous languages for comprehension by the majority of people especially those who reside in the rural areas of Zimbabwe.
- The media must be well equipped with the right facilities for reaching out to people in the rural areas. Infrastructural development, improved road networks as well as improved transmission is necessary if the media is to spread to all parts of the country.
- There is need for improved remuneration for journalists in order to enable them to carry out their duties promptly and efficiently.
- Establishment of community media since they are ideal for the development of rural communities.
- Participatory rural newspapers have to be established where people in the rural areas can have a platform to partake in developmental projects.

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