

COMMUNITY RADIO: AN IMPERATIVE FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA

BY

ACHIMOTA A. DICKSON

DEPARTMENT OF CROP PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY
NIGER DELTA UNIVERSITY, WILBERFORCE ISLAND
BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA

Email: Biosphere_resources@yahoo.com; phone: 08035508193.

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Introduction

According to the Charter of radio broadcasters of Latin America and the Caribbean which belong to the World Association of Community Radio (AMARC), communication is a universal and fundamental human right which brings people closer together, opens them to each other, develops them and makes them better men and women. Communication is therefore an instrument of harmonizing people of common destiny and focus. Radio broadcasting is one way of exercising freedom of expression, through a given technological medium: the electromagnetic waves. The electromagnetic spectrum belongs to the international community and is recognized as a common patrimony of humanity. States are responsible for administering this resource, which is limited, in a manner that most fully and equitably favors the freedom of expression via the airwaves (Charter of Radio Broadcasters of Latin America) (<http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1388>).

But even though radio broadcasting in Nigeria started on December 19, 1932 when a repeater station of the British Broadcasting Corporation set up in Lagos began operation, and the number of stations in operation increased tremendously, only two types of stations: government/public and commercial/private exist (Ayobami Ojebode and Tunde Adegbola, 2007). And whereas community radio broadcasting is now very

common all over the world including many African nations, community radio is still denied licenses in Nigeria which is not good for a nation with dire need for informing and educating rural communities, which have communication challenges about government development programmes. This paper therefore seeks to highlight the need to establish community radio stations in the Niger Delta to hasten the development of the area.

The Concept of Development

In recent years, development programming has been focused on the overriding issues of equity and equality in the distribution of the gains from development efforts. A lot of concern has been expressed about the predicament of the rural poor and the imperatives of several baseline requirements for human development. These include access to land and water resources, agricultural inputs and services, including extension and research facilities, and participatory development strategies to tackle rural poverty, with social equity and civil participation viewed as essential to well-rounded socio-economic development (UNDP, 2006). This relatively new orientation has produced concepts such as 'people-oriented development', 'participatory development' and 'sustainable human development'.

The concept of people-centred development states that meaningful development must be people-based or human-centred, since development entails the full utilization of a nation's human and material resources for the satisfaction of various (human) needs. In more specific terms, a development programme that is people-centred is expected to achieve the following objectives (Chinsman, 1995):

- Enable people to realize their potential, build self-confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment,
- Free people from poverty, ignorance, filth, squalor, deprivation and exploitation, recognizing that underdevelopment has wider social consequences, and
- Correct existing economic, social or political injustices and oppression.

The notion of 'participatory development' bridges the interrelated goals of development and the empowerment of people. Development has to be designed to capture what the people themselves perceive to be their interest and needs. Participatory development, sometimes interchangeably called popular participation, is "a process by which people take an active and influential part in shaping decisions that affect their lives" (OECD, 1995:8). According to UNDP (2006), people or communities that enjoy active participation in decision-making over issues that concern their livelihood and interests should be

able to realize their potential, self-confidence, and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment. Participatory development builds civil society and the economy by empowering social groups, communities and organizations to influence public policy and demand accountability. The process links democratic institutions with human development motivations (OECD, 1995).

More recently, the United Nations has popularized the multidimensional term 'sustainable human development', defined as "development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroys it; that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities, and provides for their participation in decisions affecting them" (James Speth, former UNDP Administrator quoted in UNDP, 2006). Speth says further that "sustainable human development is development that is pro-poor, pro-nature, pro-jobs, and pro-women. It stresses growth, but growth with employment, growth with environmental friendliness, growth with empowerment, and growth with equity".

The Niger Delta Region and Development

Geographically, the Niger Delta is located in the southern most part of Nigeria, mainly populated by the Ijaw ethnic nationality.

Spreading over a total landmass of about 75,000 square kilometers (UNDP, 2006), the region is inhabited by an estimated population of 20 million Nigerians in over 2,000 communities. The area is also home to the Ogonis, the Ikwerres, Ekpeyes, Ogbas, Egbemas, Engenes, Abuans and Oduals of Ahoada Division as well as the Obolos and the Opoboans of Opobo Division. In addition to the Ijaws of Western Delta are the Urhobos, Isokos and part of Kwale. In its present form, the Niger Delta covers the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States) and the other oil producing states (Abia, Imo and Ondo).

The Niger Delta region is characterized by wetlands and water bodies with creeks and rivers crisscrossing the entire southern parts. Fishing, farming, trading and forest products gathering remain the main occupations of the people (Alamieyeseigha, 2003). The higher-lying plains or flood plains are naturally subject to five to seven months of flooding in the year (ILACO_NEDECO, 1966), resulting from the overflowing waters of the lower Niger River in which whole communities and farmlands are totally submerged. The terrain provides limited space for human settlement which is one major reason given for the neglect of the area in terms of development activities, given the fragmentation of land into islands and the occurrence of land in isolated pockets.

In the words of Professor E.J. Alagoa (1999), “the Niger Delta was an important region of Nigeria, perhaps the most important in the period of the Atlantic trade. It is now virtually a backwater, in spite of producing the oil wealth that keeps Nigeria afloat”. Former Governor of Bayelsa State, Chief D.S.P. Alamiyeseigha described it as tragic the fact that the Niger Delta area has come to be recognized in recent times as an enclave of social conflict. The political, economic and social dynamics of the region can only be understood in the context of the on-going underdevelopment, which has oil exploration and exploitation as its principal signpost (Alamiyeseigha, 2005). Today, the Niger Delta accounts for upwards of 80 percent of Nigeria’s foreign exchange earnings and about 70 percent of government revenues (UNDP, 2006), yet several amazing paradoxes are visible in its development.

Ordinarily, the Niger Delta should be a gigantic economic reservoir of national and international importance. Its rich endowments of oil and gas resources feed into the international economic system, in exchange for massive revenues that carry the promise of rapid socio-economic transformation within the delta itself. In reality, the Niger Delta is the region suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services including health and educational facilities, high unemployment, social deprivation,

environmental degradation and deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor, and endemic conflict.

Enormous possibilities for industrial development abound in terms of the abundance of raw materials in the region, but these remain unrealized. Beyond vast oil and gas deposits, the delta is blessed with good agricultural land, extensive forests, excellent fisheries, and a large labour force. But juxtaposed against the potential for economic growth and sustainable development are deteriorating economic and social conditions that have been largely ignored by contemporary policies and actions (Jonathan, 2004: 20-21). Educational and health facilities are in a state of total disrepair; teenage pregnancies abound; HIV prevalent rates are among the highest in the country; life expectancy is falling in an age of blockbuster oil prices; energy availability is poor in a region that provides one-fifth of the energy needs of the United States; fuel prices are higher in this area than other parts of the country (much higher than the approved pump price); communal governance structures destroyed, and inter-community, intra-community and inter-ethnic conflicts have become prominent. There is an almost total lack of roads in a region whose wealth is funding gigantic infrastructural development in other parts of Nigeria and expensive peacekeeping activities in other parts of Africa. In fact with local inhabitants subjected to total degradation of their environment leading to abject poverty and suffering in the

midst of plenty, some view the oil and gas endowments as a curse and a double-edged sword (UNDP, 2006).

Community Radio as a Veritable Tool for Development in the Niger Delta

Community radio according to the African Charter on Broadcasting, is a radio which is for, by and about the community, whose ownership and management is representative of the community, which pursues a social development agenda, and, which is non-profit. From this definition, each community radio exists to serve the needs of that community; the community members participate in the planning, designing and implementing the activities of the radio station; in its programming and other activities, community radio focuses on the events, people, issues, trends, etc affecting its community. Therefore, the central mandate of community radio is to promote development at the grassroots. This development involves the people themselves and seek to bring about positive change in their living conditions and environment (e.g. in the areas of poverty eradication/wealth creation, education, health, better access to clean water, greater participation and representation in the democratic system, etc). Given the important role community radios have played in the development of other nations, community radio if

established in the marginalized communities of the Niger Delta will be useful in the following ways:

Community radio is informative. Community radio stations in the Niger Delta area are sure to provide information on issues that the mainstream communication media tend to ignore. For example, community radio stations will turn out to be voice of the people placing emphasis on such issues as the Federal Government's refusal to fully implement the Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta which is yet to be fully implemented due mainly to government's lack of political will and interest in promoting socio-economic equality. Community radio stations will inform and educate the people on the dangers of pipeline vandalization, illegal oil bunkering, kidnapping, HIV/AIDS virus and the dangers of unprotected sex/multiple sex relationships, etc. Daily programs could vary discussing the lost history/traditions of the people to instructions on how to register and vote in local and national elections. Programming can be about almost anything, as long as community members are listening and participating. Most of these stations will be run by local residents, including women and youths, whose voices are rarely heard in other mediums in Nigeria.

Community radio is educational/educative. Using community radio to reach the isolated communities with communication

difficulties in the Niger Delta could play an important role in educating the isolated communities on several issues including human rights, politics (e.g. voter education), the dangers of kidnapping and hostage taking, embracing the Federal Government's amnesty program and the full implementation of the Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, environmental protection and security. Such programming is essential in an area where many children are unable to attend school due to financial constraints. In addition, the difficult terrain, poor road network, and high illiteracy makes print media inaccessible to most of the population, while televisions are prohibitively expensive and their signals rarely reach the remote areas. Where there is signal, poverty makes it difficult for most people to subscribe to DSTV and other agents. Small, battery-powered radios, however, are abundant and within the reach of majority of the people to listen to the community radio.

Community radio defends the rights and cultures of marginalized people. In a world of growing globalization and media homogenization, community radio provides an outlet for citizen participation where all voices can express themselves and the diversity of languages and cultures defended (Lisa Viscidi, 2004). Government and commercial radio stations in Nigeria broadcast mainly in English and the languages of the majority tribes (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo), ignoring the interests

of minorities and smaller indigenous populations. Community stations, in contrast can broadcast in local indigenous languages as well, making them accessible to marginalized sectors of the populations in such cases; even the voices of the marginalized groups within the Niger Delta would be heard. The right to be different, to have distinct likes and aspirations, is today becoming an imperative of democracy. Naturally, the right to be different implies the duty to be tolerant.

Community radio is democratic. It contributes to the free expression of the different social organizations and movements, as well as the promotion of any initiative that seeks development, peace and friendship among peoples and sovereignty of nations. No discrimination exists in these stations based on race, gender, social class, sexual preference, or political or religious opinions. With proper education, the marginalized Niger Deltans will begin to claim their rights and demand a peaceful change, forgetting the use of arms, as well as harmonious living and peaceful co-existence among the various ethnic nationalities. By promoting education and citizen participation, community radio stations can enable the people of the Niger Delta to participate actively in peaceful democracy, denouncing electoral violence. The right to live and think differently is an imperative to democracy, and community radio stations promote thinking on a level—a fundamental step on the road to development.

Community radio is independent. Community radio in the Niger Delta will not accept pressures from political, military or religious authorities. It will not allow itself to be bought off by either public or economic powers. It will never remain silent in the face of injustice and denounce corruption wherever it surfaces.

In the light of the benefits enumerated above, there is need to license and establish community radio stations in the Niger Delta area to fast track development in the area and I call Mr President to do this without delay. It is on record that former President Olusegun Obasanjo was instrumental to the use of GSM in the country while late President Umaru Musa Yar'dua is credited with the establishment of campus radio stations in the academic communities, all in the communication sector. Thus, President Goodluck Ebelle Jonathan also stands the chance of writing his name in gold in the communication sector by approving the licensing of community radio for the Niger Deltans and the entire Nigerian Communities.

Thank you.

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