The Pioneer Newspaper and the Coverage of Rural Development Issues in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Philomena Effiong Umoren
Department of Mass Communication
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus, Oruk Anam, Nigeria
philoumoren12@gmail.com

&

Aniekan Aniefiok Udonquak
Department of Communication Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria
aniekanudonquak@gmail.com

Abstract

This study was designed to assess how *ThePioneer* newspaper covered rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State from 1st January to December 31st 2021. The content analysis research method was used and population of the study was 122 issues which 55 issues served as the sample size. Ten content categories were identified: education, politics, business/economy, agriculture, health, science/technology, crime/security, environment, religion and welfare. Units of analysis were news, features, comments/opinions, interviews, pictures and tables/illustrations. The findings revealed that rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State did not enjoy any appreciable form of prominence (front page) from *The Pioneer* newspaper as only 12 and 8 (4% and 2.6%) news stories appeared on the front and back pages of the newspaper respectively while 287 (93.5%) reports on rural development issues were on the inside pages of the newspaper. Second, rural development issues did not feature frequently in the newspaper as only 17% of each issue was devoted to rural development issues. Third, rural development issues were not in-depthly reported with only 842 (25.5%) paragraphs published in feature articles, 1834 (55.3%) for news stories, while 525 (15.8%) and 112 (3.4%) paragraphs were on interviews and comments/opinions respectively. Based on the findings, it is recommended that newspapers should give prominence, frequency and depth to the coverage of the rural development issues in other to help set the agenda for discourse and also fulfil their sacred social responsibility to society as it is expected.

Keywords: Rural development issues, media coverage, development communication, Akwa Ibom State

Introduction

The major functions/roles of the mass media (radio, television, newspaper, magazine) etc. are to inform the citizens of the policies and actions of the government, educate those in government on the challenges of those in the rural areas, mobilising the people on the need to actively develop the areas, suggesting ways and means to solving such problems and entertaining the citizens to enable them escape from stress and dangers (Amadi and Enyindah 2017).The media have a strong social, cultural and political impact upon society and can play an effective role to bring positive change in society. 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 (Sibanda and Mafa, 2015). However, in performing the above highlighted functions to the Nigerian society, Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012), observed that the press hardly reports any good news about the rural communities in Nigeria. For example, initiative towards peace, harmony and self efforts at rural development are hardly given attention to, by Nigerian press and this has made rural poverty and rural-urban migration increasingly unabated. The existing lacuna already created following the discriminatory allocation of resources by those in authorities can be eliminated through the establishment of the rural newspapers in the various communities (Amadi and Enyindah 2017; Umoren and Udonquak, 2021).

However, the truth in contemporary Nigeria is that there is a near if not total absence of community newspapers or rural press. This is not unconnected to the harsh economic realities of Nigeria today and the fluctuating and sometimes bleak economic fortunes of the newsprint industry globally as documented by Batta, Ekeanyanwu, and Batta (2017); Umoren and Udonquak (2020) and many other media researchers. Thus, not many communities in Nigeria can boast of and can afford to run community newspapers. Also not forgetting that newspaper production requires a great deal of resources – human, material and financial which not many people and in this case, not many communities can afford (Udoakah, 2006). The closest we have in Nigeria to community newspapers are local government established newspapers. But that again is very farfetched and very handful. Nigerian local challenges have been well documented and venturing into such economically unknown terrain it a big ask for nearly if not all the local government administrators in Nigeria. What they normally do are occasional news bulletins. What is obtainable and very common are state government established newspapers in Nigeria (Umoren and Udonquak, 2021)

Hence, it can be said that the state government newspapers have more or less replaced community newspapers for the time being in Nigeria. This is where such newspapers like *The Pioneer* newspaper owned by the Akwa Ibom State Government comes into the development process of Akwa Ibom rural communities. Advertently or inadvertently, the mantle of advocating for, propagating and ensuring that the rural development issues of communities in Nigeria as numerated by Amadi and Enyindah (2017) to include inaccessibility, seclusion, underdevelopment, poverty, drabness, boredom, ignorance, depopulation, hunger, illiteracy and all manners of sicknesses is now left for the state government established newspapers to carry; and in the case of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, *The Pioneer* newspaper. This explains the choice of the newspaper for the study and thrust of the research.

Statement of the Problem

According to Samson, Ita and Etim (2017), the adjective, rural, connotes underdevelopment, poverty, malnutrition, hunger and illiteracy. It describes an address of wretched looking people who have to till the land from dawn to dusk or trek tens of kilometres to market to eke their subsistence. The neglect of these areas by the Nigerian mainstream media, which are urban-based, has created two track societies: the haves and the have-nots, those who have access to the media and those who do not. This lack of attention given to rural development issues ought not be to be. Newspapers (national and local) should show more patriotism in the coverage of events in the rural areas as this is the only way in which their developmental needs could be addressed. Accordingly, in the absence of community newspapers in Akwa Ibom State in particular and Nigeria in general and with *The Pioneer* newspaper, owned by the government of Akwa Ibom

State Government being closest substitute to community newspapers in Akwa Ibom State, it becomes necessary to find out the extent to which *The Pioneer* newspaper, cover rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State. This is the thrust of this research.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the prominence given to rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper.
2. To ascertain the frequency of the coverage of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper.
3. To determine the depth of the coverage of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper.
4. To ascertain the direction of reports of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper.

Review of Related Literature

Rural development issues and the Mass Media

Rural development is a multilevel, multiactor, and multifaceted process that is affected by different elements including developmental model, the relationship between agriculture, industry and society, social and economic aspects and rural economic activities individual farm and local policies and institutions (Long *et al*., 2011). Rural areas play traditionally important role in a nation's economy and maintaining social stability. The development of most of them is entirely dependent on natural resources in the area, so that the economy of the rural areas is specialised in a limited number of industries - agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries, mining, rural tourism (Surchev, 2010). Rural development is, therefore, the development of rural areas in such a manner that each component of the rural life changes/transforms and proceeds in the desired direction with the other components as envisaged in a country's developmental plan. Indeed, the ability and strength of local economic interactions are pre-requisite for sustainable economic development (Namdar and Sadighi, 2013).

Furthermore, rural development is concerned with any method used in raising the quality of life of the low income population living in rural areas on a self-sustaining basis through a fundamental transformation of the rural mode of production (Popoola, 2014). The rural poverty is big part of rural development issues. For instance, the rural areas in Nigeria lacks good motor-able roads, good drinkable water, functional health care services, modern telecommunication system, electricity, good educational opportunities, modern housing etc to improve the social and economic lives of the people at the hinterland. The rural areas of Nigeria were being affected by several incapacities in various levels of severity, such as inaccessibility, seclusion, underdevelopment, poverty, drabness, boredom, ignorance, depopulation, hunger, illiteracy and all manners of sicknesses (Amadi and Enyindah 2017).

In relation, the primary, yet underlying objective of the media in any society is development; more so in developing countries. The issue of development journalism was conceptualised in the 1960s at the Press Foundation of Asia in Manila as independent journalism that provided constructive criticism of governor and its agencies, informed readers how the

development process was affecting them, and highlighted local self-help projects (Kadiri, *et al*., 2015). The concept which started almost immediately after the independence of most developing countries brought to the fore the reality and responsibilities of shaping the destinies of the new nations and the promotion of the welfare of the people, whom they had made to believe that self–governance can only lead to unlimited prosperity.

The mass media in general and newspapers in particular and rural development are closely inter-related. The role of media in the process of rural development has been recognised ever since the beginning of planned development in all over the world. In the process of societal integration and development of rural peoples' lives, media has been playing a significant role. As information is used as power, so media (print and electronics) can play a role in state operations, business operations, environment issues, monetary policy, politics, international affairs, human resources development and investment by providing accurate and dependable information. That is why various sociologist thinkers say that media has become as necessary as food and clothing is in the present day world. But to understand what role media can play in rural development, it imperative to understand media's role in all its dimensions, i.e., sociological, political and economic dimensions (Haloi, 2015).

Bittner (2005) notes that newspapers are a major force in forming public opinion and affecting national and international efforts toward economic progress and global understanding. It has the power of publicity, promotion and with a knowledge of existing conditions, the newspaper is in a better position than any other organization in the community to acquaint the general public with its needs and possibilities and to show how these needs may be met (Popoola, 2014). The role covers the political, economic and social spheres. The newspapers as a mass media set the public agenda and act as the gatekeeper of public issues. They perform the watchdog role especially in political transparency and fight against corruption. As the fourth estate, the newspapers provide the checks and balances in relation to the three branches of government, as created by the constitution. Media are particularly important in facilitating nation-building especially of post-colonial societies and those experiencing ethnic and religious diversities (Khalid, Ahmed and Mufti, 2015).

The general use of print media in development is to provide information, to sensitise, reach and stabilise groups of rural people. Compared to other media, print has the advantage of being relatively cheap, as well as better to memorise because of the fact that written words or pictures stick better in mind. This medium is comparatively low-priced and available for a wide range of people (Popoola, 2014). The mass media can play a significant role in the process of rural development by strengthening and transforming the economic, political and social life of the common people living in the remote areas. For instance, media can play an important role in the economics of rural people by searching alternative ways of making a living. It would reduce the pressure on land and increase family's economic status. It can help in enlarging the market for goods produced in the rural areas and can make the common people aware to broaden the entrepreneurial base and competitiveness among the different classes (Haloi, 2015).

However, according to Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012) the Nigerian media have often ignored the rural areas by reporting on what is taking place in the urban areas. The hardships faced by people in rural areas are not reported in the media. It is common knowledge 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. The rural people live in information deserted areas yet information on government policies should also reach them. For developmental purposes it is vital that there is information dissemination to everyone from all parts of the country (Sibanda and Mafa, 2015).

The media have been variously described as the fourth estate, agenda setter, watchdog, force multiplier, and gate-keeper, all in an effort to demonstrate their influence on society. Conversely, the media have been viewed as a venue for sensationalism, propaganda, and bias, factors hostile to national development (Khalid, Ahmed and Mufti, 2015). For rural development to be achieved, the press has a role to play. This can come in the form of passing information about a nation's development opportunities for change, method and means of achieving possible change. The need for rural mobilisation as a countervailing force for development calls for formation, at the grassroots, of strong organisation capable of articulating and protecting the interests of the local (rural) populace. Such grassroots voice has the capacity not only to draw attention to itself but also to force the central authorities to enter into a negotiated relationship with the rural communities (Popoola, 2014).

In a review of related studies, Ojebuyi and Kolawole (2016) studied theperformance of Nigerian print media regarding their coverage of the less-urban sections as compared to the attention given to the urban centres. Findings from the study showed that the analysed newspapers did not fare well in their social responsibilities and development roles. The newspapers gave more attention to the urban centres to the neglect of the rural sections while they placed monetary value on the scanty events they reported from the rural sections. According to the study, the only occasions when the rural sections received appreciable media attention was when negatives stories broke and such trend negates the tenets of social responsibility and national development. Accordingly, the study recommended that all regulating agencies in the Nigerian media industry must be alive to their statutory responsibilities in order to ensure balance and fairness in the media coverage of different sections and groups in the country.

In addition, Samson, Ita, and Etim (2017) examined the coverage of rural communities by local newspapers in Akwa Ibom State. The objectives of were to analyse the frequency of report of the rural areas, prominence attached to the rural news as well as the direction of report received by rural areas by local newspapers in Akwa Ibom State. Two local newspapers were purposively selected and content analysed. Findings from the study revealed that local newspapers in the state had always neglected the rural areas in both qualitative and quantitative news coverage and had failed to meet the information needs of the rural dweller which negates the principle of rural communication As a result, the study recommended that journalists should always try to report the developmental needs of the rural dwellers. Also, rural communities were advised not to solely dwell on the urban based newspapers to meet their information needs but they should endeavour to establish their own media platforms to further enhance their growth and development as well as meeting their information needs.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Developmental Media Theory as the framework for analysing the subject matter under consideration. The theory was propounded (McQuail, 2007) with a view to using media as instrument for development especially in the developing nations. The developmental media theory advocates media support for existing political regime and its efforts to bring about

national economic development (Baran and Davis, 2009). The media should not oppose but support the government to achieve its development objectives. Instead of isolating social, political and economic needs of the third world countries, the theory is all inclusive, encompassing a great varietyof socio-cultural, economic and political conditions which allow the media to be primarily used for development purposes. In essence, developmental media theory is regarded as a tool for achieving or fulfilling the political, cultural, social and economic goals set by the state to attain holistic development.

Methodology

For this study, the content analysis method was adopted given its quantitative nature. Content analysis is a method of studying and analysing communication in systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables (Kerlinger, 1982). *ThePioneer* newspaper covering 1st January to December 31st 2021 was selected for this study. *ThePioneer* newspaper is the Akwa Ibom State Government-owned medium produced three times a week – Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and circulated mostly in the southern part of the country. For the 365 days in the year, divided by there (3) days of publication in a week, the newspaper added up to 122 issues. Out of a total of 122 issues that made up the population of the study, 55 issues were the sample size of the study from the Taro Yamane's Sample Size Formula: $n = \frac{N}{1=N(e)2}$The study made use the systematic random sampling techniques. While the units of analysis included news stories, feature stories, comment/opinion, interviews, pictures and tables. The content categories were identified: education news.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Prominence given to Rural Development Issues by *The Pioneer* Newspaper

Newspaper	Front page/cover story	Percentage %	Back page	Percentage %	Inside page	Percentage %	Total
The Pioneer	12	4%	8	2.6%	287	93.5	307 100%

Table 1 above indicate the different pages rural development issues about Akwa Ibom State were placed in *ThePioneer* newspaper.

Table 2: Frequency of the Coverage of Rural Development Issues in Akwa Ibom State in *The Pioneer* Newspaper

Newspaper	Total Number of Newspapers Sampled (Sample size)	Frequency/Total Number of Reports on Rural Development	Percentage
ThePioneer	55	317	17%

Table 2 above shows that a total number of 317 rural development news items were reported or carried in 55 editions of *The Pioneer* newspaper that were content analysed.

Table 3: Depth of the Coverage of Rural Development Issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* Newspaper

Newspaper	News	%	Features	%	Comment/ Opinions	%	Interviews	%	Total Paragraphs	%
The Pioneer	1834	55.3%	847	25.5%	112	3.4%	525	15.8%	3317	100

Table 6 above shows the depth of the coverage of the rural development issues by *ThePioneer* newspaper.

Table 4: Direction of Reports of Rural Development Issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* Newspaper

Newspaper	Education	Politics	Business &Economy	Agriculture	Health	Science & Technology	Crime & Security	Environment	Religion	Welfare	Total
ThePioneer	25	62	39	20	39	17	49	18	39	9	317
Percentage	7.8%	19.6%	12.3%	6.3%	12.3%	5.4%	15.5%	5.7%	12.3%	2.8%	100%

Table 4 shows the direction of the coverage of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper.

DiscussionofFindings

Question 1: What is the prominence given to rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper?

The answer to this question can be found in tables 1. The table shows that out of a total of 317 stories published by *The Pioneer* newspaper, 12 stories representing 4% were placed on the front page of the newspaper as cover stories with 8 stories appearing at the back (2.6%) while 287 stories amounting to 93.5 were placed inside the newspaper. These findings correlate with the conclusion drawn from the study by Samson, Otu and Etim (2017) which revealed that most stories on rural areas were mostly found in the inside pages of the newspaper. This unfortunately means that the placement of the stories on rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper did not draw attention of the public to the rural development needs of Akwa Ibom people as most newspapers readers merely scan through the content on the inside of pages of newspapers (Bello, Abubakar and Abba, 2015).

Furthermore, this finding indicates that very few newspapers in Akwa Ibom State attempt to emphasise rural development issues in their newspapers (Samson, Otu and Etim, 2017). This is deduced from the fact that very important stories are placed in the front pages of a newspaper for prominence followed by the back page stories. This agrees with Uwom (2014) who maintains that newspapers in Nigeria pay attention to issues such as health in the rural areas but not feature such reports in the front pages of newspapers as they report political issues. The development

media theory which this study draws its strength from calls for more attention to rural development issues by the mass media in developing countries. However, this finding negates the tenets of the development media theory.

Question 2: What is the frequency of the coverage of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper?

Table 2 answers this question; *ThePioneer* newspaper, out 55 editions sampled in this study carried a total number of 317 stories concerning rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State. This means that 17% of all the stories published in each edition of the newspaper were centred on rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State. To actually determine the implication of this particular finding, other studies may need to be carried out to justify and determine what percentage of a newspaper in each edition (per publication) should focus on the rural development issues of its community. But be that as it may, there is no belittling the importance of frequency in media studies and news coverage or reportage. Again, this finding is a negation of the development media theory which this study is anchored on. It expected that the media should frequently report rural development issues. This will help set agenda for discourse and help attract government and other relevant agencies' attention to the plight of the rural dwellers.

Question 3:What is the volume of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper?

Table 3 answers that question succinctly. A total of 3317 paragraphs of news items comprising of news stories, features, comments/opinions and interviews were published rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper. Out of the 3317 paragraphs of news items, 1843 representing 55% were centred on news stories, 847 paragraphs representing 25.5%. Comments/opinions gulped 112 paragraphs representing 3.4% while 525 paragraphs representing 15.8% were interviews. For this study, depth was measure on the number of paragraphs that each news item concerning rural development carried. This was very important to assess because Bello, Abubakar and Abba (2015) note that the media must go beyond merely reporting the event in summary. Detailed reports which show proper investigation and due process of executing judgement must be presented.

Question 4: What is the direction of reports of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper?

Table 4 answers the question on the direction of the coverage of rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State by *The Pioneer* newspaper. A total of 317 news items were published by *The Pioneer* newspaper concerning rural development issues in Akwa Ibom State. Out of the figure, 25 items representing 7.8% was on education; 62 representing 19.6% was politics; 39 representing 12.3% was about business/economy while agriculture took 20 representing 6.3%. Furthermore, health was 39 representing 12.3%; science and technology was 17 representing 5.4%; crime and security matters was 49 representing 15.5%; environment was 15 representing 5.7; religion was 39 representing 12.3% while welfare was 8 representing 2.8%. This finding shows that as always hypothesised, politics is always the main focus of Nigerian newspapers. Key facets of society such as education, business/economy, agriculture which is supposed to be the mainstay of the Nigerian economy in general and for Akwa Ibom State in particular were grossly under-reported and covered, while politics got the highest representation. This might

even have been worse had *The Pioneer* newspaper not been a state-owned news medium. According to Samson, Otu and Etim (2017), *The Pioneer* had report the rural areas mainly because of the need to publicise government programmes. This primary finding of *The Pioneer* newspaper devoting more space to political collaborates with Uwom (2014) who maintains that newspapers in Nigeria pay attention to issues such as health in the rural areas but not feature such reports in the front pages of newspapers as they report political issues.

Conclusion

In the media discourse, the nature of coverage received by the different sections/segments of the society has often been a point of controversy. For instance, at the international level, the third world countries are consistently complaining of being neglected by the media of the powerful nations while some are of the opinion that the attention or coverage received by the less developed countries is nothing to write home about. In the same vein, the issue of coverage of rural areas are not always given priority in the local media. This necessitated this study to investigate the level of adherence to rural communication principles which have been identified to include reportage of issues in agriculture, health, crimes, education and employment opportunities of the people etc. by local newspapers in Akwa Ibom State.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are made:

1. Nigerian newspapers and other mass media in the country should begin to accord more prominence to rural development issues. But so doing, they would have set the agenda for discourse which will help bring to the limelight developmental issues that are of concern to the rural dwellers.
2. Newspapers should create a platform, or strengthen the existing ones, where more inputs or opinions from members of the public, regarding rural development issues, could be expressed more frequently on the pages of Nigerian newspapers. This is a great part of the fulfilment of the social responsibility that the media owe any society it operates in.
3. Since one the significant reasons for rural development issues neglect in upstream journalism practice is the structure of Nigerian journalism, it is highly recommended that Nigerian media houses should either endeavour to hire more rural-centric minded reporters or impress it upon the existing the ones to change their mindset about the coverage of rural development issues and events.
4. Last, since most Nigerians live in the rural areas with farming as their major occupation, these rural dwellers feed the nation yet their issues are not reported by the press. Accordingly, newspapers should carry reports about farming and other economic activities in the areas such as: formation of cooperatives, establishment of small and medium scale enterprises by communities and views of the rural entrepreneurs on national issues and economic policies.

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