

Hearing the Voices of the Poor: Encouraging Good Governance and Poverty Reduction through Media Sector Support

by Dr. Ann Hudock

“**POLITICS IS AS IMPORTANT TO SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT** as economics,” said United Nations Development Programme’s Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, the principal author of the UNDP’s 2002 Human Development Report “Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World.”¹ Reforming governments and sustaining processes for reform in developing economies require the active participation of the governed themselves. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process insists on widespread citizen participation in policy discussions, but to be effective, participation must be of a certain quality, or discourse may be stalled, at best. At worst, it may lead to resentment and social conflict.

To participate effectively in policy formation, citizens and their representatives need timely, relevant, and clear information and analysis of political and economic issues. Among society’s institutions, an independent media is best positioned to disseminate information, educate the public and policymakers, create a platform for diverse views, and keep the citizenry informed about socioeconomic developments, especially as they relate to the PRSP process.

Yet, in most developing countries, the media are not prepared for this role. Media sectors, as a whole, face large obstacles to realizing their potential as government watchdogs and champions of public interest. Further, many governments do not support a free and robust media sector, regardless of its importance to democratic and economic growth. As a result, many people in developing countries are not only unaware of the intricacies and arguments surrounding political and economic issues, they are unaware of the role of international financial institutions and of the entire PRSP process itself. Clearly, without this knowledge, citizens cannot adequately contribute to policy discussions, monitor their government, or even formulate informed opinions to convey to civil society organizations and political representatives. To better meet the needs of their societies, media need support, including support for the entire sector. Current “communication strategies” for helping the media sector introduce and sustain political and economic discourse, even those strategies developed specifically to disseminate awareness about the PRSP process, are inadequate to meet the challenges.

This paper argues that heightened media involvement in the PRSP process could help build a stronger independent media sector while preparing citizens to take an active role in dialogues that will have a huge impact on their lives. Media involvement would help frame issues for discussion; provide background analysis; and disseminate results of the consultations, noting minority or dissenting points of view. In addition, similar to the steps taken to strengthen the private sector in developing countries, the resulting PRSP itself could include legal and regulatory reforms that would facilitate the development of an independent media sector. A skilled and viable independent media sector is a society’s most promising tool for providing citizens the information they need to bring about and sustain government reform and poverty reduction.



Introduction

"There are many reasons some countries have not made more development progress," asserts a recent USAID report, "but common to almost all of them is bad governance."² Reforms that encourage good governance may also promote poverty reduction as citizens effectively help shape laws, monitor the distribution of public resources, and hold the government accountable for the effects of its economic policies on the poor. To the extent that the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process insists that governments consult with the governed, it is a promising mechanism not only for poverty reduction, but also for improved governance. Indeed, the PRSP process is designed to incorporate the results of participatory discussions around poverty reduction, particularly soliciting the input of poor people in national economic policymaking. The PRSP framework itself provides an opportunity for citizens to influence and monitor government expenditures in an attempt to increase the transparency and accountability of public institutions. As a World Bank/International Monetary Fund review of the PRSP process found, "The open and participatory nature of the PRSP approach is regarded by many as its defining characteristic and its most significant achievement."³

Well-informed citizens are crucial to the success of the PRSP development process and to ensuring lasting results of its implementation. Yet developing an informed citizenry is not often a government priority. Even when governments have the political will to engage citizens in sectoral and microeconomic policymaking, such as when this engagement is mandated by international financial institutions (IFIs) as part of concessional lending packages, there can be difficulties ensuring productive, effective participation. A robust and independent media sector has a central and unique role in providing citizens with the information they need to participate effectively in the consultative process. Without the active participation of the media, civil society organizations (CSOs) and individual citizens are unlikely to fully understand the issues being debated, the trade-offs governments face in terms of policy options to promote poverty alleviation and economic development, and the implications this has for a society's economic well-being.

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The Media's Contribution to Political and Economic Development

Independent media have a crucial role in promoting good governance at the local, national, and global levels. Among other things, media in impoverished countries could present to citizens and policymakers alike more information about the causes of poverty. Feature stories and hard news on the impact of various economic development programs at the community level could help citizens advocate appropriate policy reforms. News of this nature could also help policymakers make informed decisions about programs and resource allocations designed to assist the poor and reduce poverty.

More importantly, healthy media sectors in poor countries could improve the national dialogue around economic and political issues. In particular, there is a greater need to foster debate on the macroeconomic framework of the PRSPs. This debate is lacking in many of the countries that have to date prepared PRSPs. The media's involvement in this process can help frame the issues for discussion, provide background analysis that will inform the consultations, note dissenting points of view, and then disseminate the results of the process to a broad audience. Information dissemination is critical following consultative processes between citizens and government, since without it, conflicts can arise when different segments of society have put forward competing priorities, or when expectations are raised regarding enhanced service delivery under the PRSP. As Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith observed,

Unstructured and unmanaged participation may lead to disharmony and confusion, not necessarily to good policy. . . . Costless and risk-free participation is impossible. Managing it is complex and may fail or lead to unexpected outcomes. Bringing external groups into policy decisions puts many demands on public managers. It also takes time, which can impede rapid decision-making. If handled improperly, participation may produce policy stalemate, or worse, social conflict and societal division if actors cannot agree or compromise.⁴

Although, as the "fourth estate," the media sector may be well positioned to stimulate democratic participation and protect public interest, its potential lies largely untapped. A full chapter of the World Development Report 2002, "Building Institutions for Markets," lays out the ways in which media can improve

governance and support markets. The report argues that the “media need to be independent, accountable, and able to provide relevant information and reflect diverse social views.”⁵ But, the report warns, too often the media do not have these qualities; thus, their contribution to social, economic, and political development is limited.

While there are inherent risks in and technical challenges to involving poor people in discussions about economic policymaking and resource allocation, the potential payoffs are great. A media sector that distills and delivers economic information to a broad audience in a meaningful and useful way provides a vehicle for exchange of diverse viewpoints, and it offers a pressure valve for venting when particular perspectives are not incorporated into final policy documents or programs.

Given that the PRSP process is legitimized by the informed participation of citizens, independent media development is an urgent priority in many poor and indebted countries. A recent report from the Panos Institute examined the PRSP experiences in Uganda, Lesotho, and Ethiopia and found that many people living in those countries do not know what a PRSP is, in spite of the supposedly robust participatory processes undertaken to craft them.⁶ The same report noted that in Nicaragua, several NGOs observed that the macroeconomic framework was decided in advance of the PRSP through the separate IMF program, the Poverty Reduction Grant Facility (PRGF), which was negotiated at the same time as the PRSP.⁷ This criticism was echoed by CSOs around the world during the World Bank and IMF review of the PRSP process, noting a disconnection between the PRSP, which is supposed to be designed in consultation with citizens, and the PRGF, which is negotiated behind closed doors with government. Ideally, the PRGF should flow from the priorities laid out in the PRSP, not the other way around.

The extent to which the media sector in developing countries requires support to perform its role is revealed in a Freedom House assessment of the media sector. Freedom House, an international NGO working to promote democracy and human rights around the world, publishes an annual Press Freedom Survey, which ranks countries as “free,” “partly free,” or “not free” based on the degree to which each country permits the free flow of information.⁸ Numerical points are assigned to facilitate judgment; thus, countries with a score of 0-30 are deemed “free,” countries with a score of 31-60 are

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“partly free,” and those with a score of 61-100 are “not free.” Figure 1 shows the Press Freedom Survey ranking of the first nineteen countries to complete a PRSP.

Despite the urgent need to build the media sector’s capacity to educate publics about the PRSP process and related issues, many governments are not in a hurry to

support—or to see outside donors support—a vibrant media sector, which may be perceived as a potential threat to the power structure of fragile democracies or autocratic regimes. More enlightened regimes, however, understand the media’s beneficial role in disseminating information that fosters economic, political, and social development. In these circumstances, donors must contribute to the development of an independent media, and then help the sector produce quality information in a timely fashion and disseminate this information widely. Such support would include developing the legal enabling environment in which the media operate; training journalists to report in a professional and credible manner; enhancing media outlets’ prospects for financial viability and independence from government

FIGURE 1. Press freedom in the first nineteen countries that have completed a PRSP

Not Free	Partly Free	Free
Ethiopia	Albania	Bolivia
Gambia	Burkina Faso	Guyana
Guinea	Honduras	
Mauritania	Malawi	
Rwanda	Mozambique	
Vietnam	Nicaragua	
Yemen	Niger	
Zambia	Tanzania	
		Uganda

control; and assisting professional and watchdog associations that encourage the strength, quality, and integrity of the sector.

The lack of community-owned or public information-oriented media is another obstacle to the media's advancement of substantive debate on economic agendas and other poverty-related issues. Media sectors are increasingly dependent on advertising, and as a result tend to become consumer- and business-oriented.⁹ When the media's public service functions are set aside to make room for commercial interests, the media cannot adequately perform the critical functions of disseminating information and educating the public.

A report by the Panos Institute, one of the few sources available on media involvement in the PRSP process, notes that additional constraints to getting the PRSP process into the news agenda include:

- Preference for political and entertainment reporting over poverty and development issues coverage
- Lack of technical skills within the journalism corps to report on economic development and sectoral-specific issues such as health, education, agriculture
- Poor relationship between government and journalists, hindering investigative and thorough coverage of development issues
- Lack of coalitions between CSOs and media, hindering free flow of information between expert sources and journalists
- Lack of financial support, leading media outlets to demand payment for coverage of stories as a pre-condition for publishing them
- Urban bias of media, which limits coverage of poverty-oriented stories since these are often seen as rural issues.¹⁰

Some countries, such as Niger, have undertaken "strategic communication plans" to raise national awareness of and support for the PRSP process. Yet, these efforts are not enough to ensure adequate opportunity for public participation. Nor have these efforts produced a media sector capable of providing information to citizens and government in a way that enhances development services for citizens, allows citizens to serve as watchdogs of government, or enables

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governments to make informed policy choices.

The World Bank has prepared a PRSP Sourcebook. Its media-related chapter focuses on the strategic use of communication tools and concepts to promote information dissemination. Such a focus presupposes a media sector that could facilitate information dissemination on technical issues

related to economic development. It also presupposes that the approach would promote enhanced transparency and accountability of governments. However, as the Freedom House Press Survey reveals, most PRSP countries do not have media sectors with these capabilities or even the political space to operate.

Rather than focusing communications efforts solely around public relations or information campaigns, financial and technical resources should be sought and channeled towards media sector development. This effort would have a lasting impact on poverty reduction through enhanced information flow around sectoral issues, increased citizen voice in policymaking processes, and greater transparency and accountability of government. The institutional development of the media sector is a long-term prospect. It should not be undertaken to the exclusion of public outreach efforts since these efforts are important to reach citizens in the short term. The challenge is to find ways to integrate short-term interventions with long-term media sector development in order to help the media inform the public, create space for dialogue between citizens and government on national economic development and political issues, and serve as a watchdog of government performance.

In sum, the media have not been as involved as they could have been in national consultative processes where PRSPs have been developed; nor have investigative and economic journalists generated stories regarding public policies and expenditures for poverty reduction, which would help hold government accountable for commitments made under the PRSPs. Journalists in most developing countries need leeway to publicize and track the PRSPs during their development, relate them at the outset of implementation to national budgets, and follow these budgets through to project expenditures, particularly to the community level to see if in fact the resources are reaching those for whom they were intended and whether or not they are making a difference in the lives of the poor. Most—if not all—



PRSPs to date have missed the opportunity to address barriers to free flows of information through media law reforms. In short, the media need to be viewed as an integral part of institutional reform within countries, and the PRSP is one place to reflect these reforms.

Integrating the Media with the Consultative Process

Supporting media sector development through the PRSP framework consists of a two-fold approach. First, the PRSP consultative process should be viewed as an opportunity to invite the media into development discussions; connect them with CSOs for feature story as well as hard news leads; encourage them to act as a platform for serious debate between citizens and the government; and represent plural voices by reporting across ethnic, political, and economic sections of society. The media also have a critical role to play in setting the agenda for participatory discussions between citizens and government.

Second, the PRSP can propose legal and regulatory reforms that would facilitate the development of an independent media sector, just as many PRSPs recognize the importance of the legal and regulatory framework for the development of the private sector. Also, media regulatory reform and private sector development are not unrelated, since independent media is often found in the private sector, and free flows of information can support market development generally, and poverty alleviation specifically.¹¹

The Case of Tajikistan

Freedom House's 2002 Press Freedom Survey rated Tajikistan "not free." The Tajik media is constrained by a poor legal environment for media freedom. At a December conference sponsored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Ibragim Usmanov, State Adviser to the President of Tajikistan, said, "We need to improve our media legislation using the experiences of European and other countries."¹² Civil society representatives agreed. The Chairman of the National Association of Independent Media in Tajikistan (NANSMIT), Nuriddin Karshybaev, argued that non-state media should not be "hampered" by "unclear licensing processes and other limitations."¹³ Efforts need to be taken to amend the current legal provisions and

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introduce new media laws that will enhance the legal environment for media freedom. Without such improvements, any poverty reduction program is likely to be hindered by the citizens' lack of information about government commitments and implementation of those commitments. As a result, citizens will be unable to press for government accountability and transparency.

In November 2002, a Joint Staff Assessment (JSA) of the World Bank and IMF confirmed the governance problems discussed in the Tajikistan PRSP, including deficiencies in public administration and financial

management and an undeveloped legal and judicial system. No mention was made in either the PRSP or the JSA of the need to support media as a means to enhancing governance or reducing poverty.

However, one JSA recommendation for addressing weak public sector capacity and the need to implement appropriate policies is to "...emphasize decentralized service provision heavily relying on community involvement. This will require efforts to strengthen accountability and financial management at the community and local government levels."¹⁴ Such decentralization would increase the needs and opportunities for public participation and broad information dissemination. It would help facilitate a media sector that could disseminate quality information in a timely manner to a broad audience, and thereby support civil society efforts to hold government accountable and track financial flows, particularly once they reach the community level. The media could provide a platform for exchanging diverse views, helping the government adopt appropriate sector policies based on the input citizens provide through the media. In addition, examples around the world have demonstrated the positive impact of media on education, health, and agriculture programs.¹⁵

The Tajikistan PRSP also highlights a number of anti-corruption and good governance objectives, but is unclear about how the government would pursue these goals. The JSA encouraged the authorities to more fully develop the strategy to improve governance and combat corruption. The media should be an essential prong of that strategy, with efforts directed toward improving the strength, independence, and quality of the sector overall.

A Wider Role for IFIs in Media Sector Support

Poverty reduction rests on more than good governance at the national level. Governance of the IFIs that play a leading role in supporting the PRSP process and of the investments that follow from it are also central to successful poverty reduction efforts. There needs to be greater space for country ownership of development plans within the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. More attention must be paid to the domestic political landscape of borrower countries and institutions and the effect it has on development outcomes, and to internal IFI governance structures that encourage transparency and accountability of the lending institutions themselves.

The World Bank acknowledges that IFIs need to pay greater attention to political development while recognizing that they must stay out of the political arena. Economic and Social Sector Development Vice President Ian Johnson said at a recent World Bank session discussing the UNDP 2002 Human Development report, "We need to get more professional in our understanding of political processes, not to interfere in domestic politics but to understand the dynamics of decision making in any country."¹⁶

Without increased attention by the IFIs to the role of politics and political institutions in the development process, the rhetorical commitments to participatory development practices and poverty reduction will not be realized in concrete terms. More research is needed on the internal incentive structures that impede or enhance the IFIs' ability to develop their political acumen and to support the reform of political institutions within the parameters of the World Bank charter.¹⁷

IFIs must also ensure successful outreach to citizens, especially the poor. In many indebted countries, IFIs remain shrouded in mystery and seem to operate in secret. As a result, they are blamed for all that has gone wrong economically, and even politically, in these countries. For the most part, the media have not played a leading role in educating the population about the IFIs or the economic reform programs that have been undertaken in these countries. In spite of recent efforts by the IFIs to revamp their information disclosure policies, few citizens in developing countries have access to relevant documents, often because they lack Internet

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capabilities to download them from central Web sites, because they simply don't know these documents exist, or because the documents are not readily available in local languages. Even when these technical challenges are overcome, the information provided is often not in a format that is readily understandable to the layperson. As a result, these documents provide little insight into the commitments governments have made to the IFIs, or how these commitments affect peoples' daily lives.

Donors, of course, cannot and should not develop media sectors wholesale. They lack the resources to do so, and even if they had them, such a strong foreign influence would call into question both the credibility of the outlets and the health of the sector. Instead, donors must pay attention to developing the commercial viability of outlets and supporting regulations and institutions that encourage development of the sector without diminishing the media's public service role.

For their part, in countries where the IFIs are active participants in economic policy formulation, media managers must prioritize reporting on the IFIs and their programs, given their impact on national economic development. In addition, journalists need assistance collecting and analyzing the information, and distilling it so that it has relevance for citizens at large. There are additional challenges to disseminating information to the poor, especially in African countries that lack the telecommunications infrastructure enjoyed by middle-income and developed countries. Challenges to reaching the poor include, but are not limited to, the relatively lower literacy levels of impoverished groups; their remote locations away from mass media like television, or their lack of access to radios (or batteries to run them); and their all-consuming focus on meeting basic needs, which leaves little time for processing information, particularly when it is not presented in a way that underscores the relevancy to their own situation.

Media Support: Recommendations for Reform

If the media in developing countries are to promote good governance and poverty reduction, three broad goals should guide media sector assistance:

1. Give voice to the poor by providing usable information, a platform for discussion, and

feedback loops between government and citizens.

2. Improve the media's capacity for reporting on socioeconomic and development issues by enhancing information flows surrounding public health, education, agriculture, and other development interventions.
3. Increase government transparency and accountability by promoting the watchdog role of media.

Improving the media's capacity to promote good governance and poverty reduction requires a strategy for supporting the sector as a whole, not for merely providing limited interventions that support individual media outlets (or even journalists), or that promote information dissemination without attention to the infrastructure and environment needed to sustain free flows of information over the long term.

Such a comprehensive approach could include the following activities:

- Promoting free and independent media through appropriate legislative and regulatory mechanisms specific to the media sector
- Promoting the development of the larger enabling environment for independent media (for example by strengthening institutions, such as the judiciary, whose existence can enhance media freedom)
- Promoting investment, equity and debt financing, leasing, and other mechanisms to capitalize the media industry
- Promoting industry-wide trade organizations and professional associations
- Counteracting government dissemination and control of information
- Raising the level of professional journalism
- Increasing horizontal ties among media professionals
- Expanding educational and practical programs for journalists, such as electronic information gathering
- Expanding educational and practical programs for managers and editors, such as business, management, and technical skills
- Increasing access to and ownership of means for production and distribution
- Expanding professional contacts and collaboration between domestic and foreign media companies and institutions¹⁸

The consultative process for developing the PRSP offers an opportunity for citizens and governments to

change the way they relate to one another. Even in countries where political will for reform is lacking, progress can be made as the IFIs and the donor community provide assistance contingent upon evidence of country ownership of development plans and on citizen participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of these plans. The PRSP provides an opportunity for governments to address weaknesses in the media sector through legal reforms, and for donors to support media sector development in ways that help it promote good governance and become financially viable without sacrificing its public-service potential.

An institution that can inform citizens, foster debate, and help hold government accountable to its citizenry is essential for advancing economic and political development. An independent media sector is such an institution. As a vibrant and independent media sector spreads information in ways that promote positive development outcomes in key industries such as public health, education, and agriculture, it is a critical ally in poverty reduction. Most fundamentally, the media can serve as a watchdog, holding government accountable for commitments made to citizens, and reporting on the impact of these programs and policies. As the 2002 Human Development Report states, "Perhaps no reform can be as significant for making democratic institutions work as reform of the media"¹⁹

Notes

This is the fourth in a series of five papers that examines the linkages between global and national governance as reflected in the PRSP process. This series was made possible through the generous support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

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