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EXCESSIVE GOVERNANCE: THE BANE OF POVERTY AND A CHALLENGE TO COMMUNICATORS

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The best government is one that thinks it better to leave as much wealth as possible among the people to let them spend it for goods they know best. The worst government is one that takes as much of the peoples' wealth as possible and then asks how it, the government, ought to spend its surplus wealth.

— James V. Schall

In most parts of the African continent, there is an overdose of governance. After many years of independence, our colonial past continues to get blamed for the lack of positive development in the social, economic and political spheres. Attempts by the International Community to insist on minimum requirements for good governance with regards to disciplined economic practices, adoption of democracy, transparency, respect for human rights and concern for the disadvantaged are routinely rebuffed. Non-interference in the internal matters of sovereign states are quoted as alibis to continue in reverse-development. Indeed many African countries now have euphemistic terminologies such as “home-grown democracy”, “defence of sovereignty and national security”, “African solution to African problems” and many more to cover up for the peculiar knack for permanency in government and queer unending transition programmes.

As we approach the dawn of the new millennium and as the failures of the past stare all of us in the face, the whole idea of governance and its relevance have become an active subject for public

discussion. African governments would have to choose between recoiling into the “dark ages and the state of nature” or embrace the modern world of borderless relationships. Governments’ over-regulation, meddling in business, politicisation of the public service, and anti-democratic mien, particularly in Africa, have proved to be a hindrance to the much needed development. The massive governments, built over the years have inefficiently utilised resources, allowed extreme poverty in the midst of plenty, aided corruption, created bloated bureaucracies, excluded more than 75 percent of the people, accommodated dictatorial and tyrannical governments (military and civil), and tolerated abysmal human rights records.

It is saddening when one is confronted with film clippings of starved children and maimed adults in the never-ending conflict-prone African countries. The Great Lakes region, the Horn of Africa, West, Central and Southern Africa have and are currently experiencing military coups, civil armed struggles, border clashes and civil wars. All these came about because governance has been misconstrued to mean a short cut to amassing wealth, unlimited power and conversion of the commonwealth to that of the ruling family and a few loyalties.

It is therefore not surprising when one is confronted with such scary data of tragic consequences of the failure of governments. Such data reveals that in Africa, 3 billion people live on/under \$2 a day, 1.3 billion live on/under \$1 a day, 100 million go hungry every day and 150 million lack educational opportunities. Furthermore, 700 million people in developing countries are underfed, 400 million children die of hunger and disease everyday, 750 tonnes of top soil are lost every second, 47,000 hectares of forest are destroyed everyday, 16,000 hectares of land turned into desert everyday, 100 species of animals become extinct everyday because of deforestation and degradation. Africa’s rapid population growth of 3 percent a year (one of the highest in the world) as against the poor 2 per cent food production growth is a mismatch which leads to more importation of food and aids. In 1994, Africa’s per capital income had fallen by about 30 per cent from its 1980 level of \$850 — the situation has deteriorated further. These disturbing figures can be reeled out in virtually every aspect of human life.

Jumbo Governments

How did we come about the octopus governments around us today? What makes them grow by the day? What can be done to contain their growth and redirect governments (in Africa) to their primary responsibility of providing an enabling environment rather than acquire responsibilities they are not equipped and able to cope with? George Marotta (1998) gave **six reasons why governments keep growing**. They are paraphrased below:

- a. Bureaucrats are many and are growing at all levels of governance — Federal, State and Local. The perks of office and job preservation motivates them to keep it growing.
- b. Too much money at the disposal of the central (Federal) government. This leads to deficit financing, jumbo loans, white elephant projects that never get completed and misappropriation of public funds. [More than 55 per cent of the wealth of Nigeria is in the hands of the central government].
- c. The media encourages the growth by its very nature which makes it magnify societal problems. As the saying goes — “bad news sells and the good does not”. What further excuse does the government want for a spending spree?
- d. Electorates are compromised because of perceived benefits from government. As usual, most promises made by politicians are meant to be broken as they see their election as an opportunity to have a big bite at the national cake.
- e. Obsolete programmes are rarely discontinued, rather, they get duplicated with more funds committed.
- f. Human beings are by nature compassionate. This contributes to big governments. Whereas intellectually and practically, government cannot solve all problems; familial and societal failure encourages it to play “the compassionate state” howbeit ineffectively.
- g. Bureaucrats and Government leaders create or encourage crises to justify expanding government. Military ambition and wars also create bigger governments but after problems resolutions, the former size is never reverted to and security budget continues to increase. (Imagine how billions of dollars were misappropriated in Nigeria under the guise of national security).

The current thinking is for governments to revert to their traditional and primary roles of securing “the blessings of liberty”, “establish justice”, and “maintain social order” — not by mandating outcomes but by setting minimum standards of just conduct and leaving individuals free to pursue their own values within the law. Governments should also be the last resort to solve problems rather than the first. As Frederick Hayek puts it, “... the more you look to government to solve your problems, the more power that government will have to later oppress you”. After all, responsible governance does not require abundant wealth, it only takes discipline, diligence, integrity, prudent management of resources, genuine concern for the weak through the creation of a conducive environment for enterprise and a free democratic system. A combination of these factors would lead to the elusive development lacking in the continent. Once again, Marotta’s **four-step solution for a streamlined government apparatus** are adapted below for this paper:

1. The 3-tiers of government should not run programmes that are better left with private entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations and religious bodies. Commercialisation, privatisation and increased divestiture of the incongruent responsibilities to other structures will help.
2. Governments should adopt accepted and tested forms of government. Where appropriate, powers should be delegated to the states and the local governments. The Zero Party, Diarchy, One-party, Unitary and its other variants that are attractive to African leaders are unacceptable.
3. There should be support for improved information dissemination (symmetric communication) by making data simple, accessible, adaptable and useable. Use of modern technology to the best advantage in conjunction with traditional media should be encouraged.
4. People must individually and collectively fight fraud and corruption at all levels of government. Accountability and transparency should be the watchword of all. Set time limits for projects and service time for public officers (bureaucrats) and even elected officials.

If all of these things are done, it is expected that development will shift from its present urban and elite bias to that which takes cognisance of the majority of the poor people (about 75 per cent) scattered and forgotten in the rural areas. All the programmes that government talk about and the billions of naira purportedly voted for making life better for the poor are not worth more than the papers on which these promises are put during the annual budget formalities. Poverty has therefore remained a recurring factor in the life of an average African. The phenomenon, its manifestations and attempt at tackling them in Nigeria would be discussed next.

Poverty: Manifestations and Cure

Were the quantum of anti-poverty rhetoric the yardstick for its understanding and concrete attempts at tackling the scourge, then it would not be as topical and fresh as it is today, decades after it has been seen as the greatest enemy of mankind. Poverty is no respecter of persons, no matter their race or creed. The irony in the developing countries, Nigeria as an example, is that poverty persists in the midst of abundant wealth. This failure, research has shown, is a result of the lack of knowledge by the development specialists, academics and bureaucrats to understand and appreciate what poverty really is. As Robert Chambers (1995) puts it, "A person who is not poor who pronounces on what matters to those who are poor is in a trap." For these reasons, I shall attempt to look at poverty from the perspectives we rarely consider so that as communicators we would be able to appreciate the phenomenon better.

What Is Poverty?

Lacking what is needed for well-being and a full good life. Its dimensions are physical, social, economic, political and psychological. It includes forms of disadvantage such as physical weakness, isolation, penury, vulnerability and powerlessness.

The conventional definition of poverty as "low income, low consumption and general ill-being" in the face of the above is grossly inadequate and could be misleading. Is it therefore any surprise that no significant solution has been found to this social malaise? When the poor are sampled to know what they think of poverty, they rated their

self-respect over having food to eat. The poor regards their inability to bury their dead as more worrisome than not being employed or earning high income. Do we as elites and academics realise the full implications of seasonality in the poverty equation? Hear a Sri Lankan mother's agony:

I say to the father of my child, "Father of Podi Sinho," "There is no *kurrakan* in the house, there is no millet and no pumpkin, not even a pinch of salt. Three days now and I have eaten nothing but jungle leaves. There is no milk in my breast for the child". Then I get foul words and blows. "Does the rain come in August?" he says. "Can I make the *kurrakan* flower in July? Hold your tongue, you fool. August is the month in which the children die. What can I do?"

** Gerard Gill (1991) "Seasonality and Agriculture In The Developing World: A Problem Of The Poor And Powerless" in Chambers R. (1995) *Poverty And Livelihood: Whose Reality Counts?*

Sad. Very sad. Yet communicators, politicians and development experts watch the poor die in their millions on satellite television in the comfort of their homes turning them on and off with as little passing attention as they can manage. In the end, the "frequent viewing inoculates against compassion" and this affects our attitude to the whole issue of deprivation and being disadvantaged. Ironically too, there is more wealth in the world today than ever before but the insatiable appetite of the "haves" would continue to push the "have nots" in their millions down the slope of more poverty and vulnerability.

Using the Nigeria experience as an example, attempts at alleviating poverty have had little or no impact in the face of other uncomplimentary and contradictory policies. Since independence, the routine of annual budgets have always emphasised the need to banish poverty from the land. In the last two decades, there have been many declarations to this effect and some programmes were actually packaged to make this possible. Each of the programmes betrayed the narrow understanding of government's perception of what poverty really is and how best to tackle it. Thus, "Operation Feed the Nation"

tended to see poverty as being a lack of good nutrition and media promotion of agriculture. At another point, the National Directorate of Employment was created with the belief that job creation and entrepreneurial opportunities would end poverty. In recent times, credit delivery to the poor rural and suburban small producers was seen as a panacea to the problems of low productivity. For this purpose, the People's Bank of Nigeria and the unit Community Banks were created. To resolve the issue of neglect, denials and oppression against the womenfolk, "Better Life For Rural Dwellers" (BLRD), "Family Support Programme" (FSP) and their economic corollary "Family Economic Advancement Programme" (FEAP) were designed and implemented at various times and with very high hopes for the poor. In the end, only a few of these programmes achieved some qualified successes. All these programmes could not make the desired impact because of faulty designs, poor implementation, lack of continuity and the overbearing attitude of government and its agencies.

There is another example of how government establish laudable programmes for the wrong reasons — political placebo and ego booster for the new ruling class a.k.a "First Ladyship". In Nigeria, the Office of the First Lady, meant to be ceremonial, wields so much power and control on people-oriented programmes [Peoples Bank, Ministry of Women Affairs, FSP, FEAP etc.], that the programmes became money spinners for the first ladies at the State and even Local Government levels. The presence of these array of amorphous credit dispensers in an otherwise highly technical concern cannot but produce the mystery of the result not being commensurate with the inputs. The results from such a group can be likened to bad photographs that are over-exposed but underdeveloped.

The Family Economic Advancement Programme is a well-funded programme that Nigeria established in response to the worldwide Micro-Credit Initiative that was intended to reduce poverty. Given the present big bureaucratic set up on ground, the poor will only get whatever trickles down, as the bulk of the funds would be expended on administration and infrastructure. Apart from the fact that the programme has been unable to liaise and work with other grassroots-oriented projects that preceded it, it has also not been able to focus on the special target — the really poor people. Its preference to do

business with the big commercial banks which see the poor as too risky to enjoy their credit facilities is also a sign of further alienation and deprivation. Both the government and FEAP operatives are misinforming the public by presenting the programme as the only solution to poverty in Nigeria. Even though the traditional *esusu* and its other local equivalents with the modernised community banks are right there in the localities, they are rarely mentioned. Yet, these institutions are the products of the resilience, resourcefulness and economic viability of the community system.

If anything, FEAP is more geared towards preventing more of the middle class from becoming poorer. As it is presently run, retired public officers and fairly educated people have better chances of fitting into the very sophisticated and expensive programme. How can the illiterate men or women (more than 70 per cent of the total population) in the village operate a cottage industry of the type on offer without education? Who takes charge of the infrastructure, environment, health and good governance? Can one omnibus organisation, even with a ballooning budget, solve the problem of poverty from the coast to the dry lands?

Poverty alleviation would remain a difficult nut to crack, unless African governments resolve to address it sincerely. The current penchant for rhetoric and abridged implementation of micro-credit programmes requires urgent attention. Given its critical dimensions, there is need to harmonise all anti-poverty-related programmes into one. A national policy framework that stipulates the relational workings of these organisations is a precondition before money is voted (but the reverse is the case now). This would have guaranteed viability, sustainability, accessibility, improved funding and reduced the mammoth cost of administration and other wastes.

Pope John Paul II in his 1993 World Peace Day address said:

Poverty and destitution are threats to world peace.... They constitute a grave affront to human dignity and contribute to social instability. The world rich must give a hand to the poor nations of Africa, Latin America and Asia.

James Wolfenson, World Bank President, also amplified the Papal's injunction when he averred in his challenge to donor and credit agencies in Hong Kong in 1997 that:

Our goal must be to reduce these disparities across and within countries, to bring more and more people into the economic mainstream, to promote equitable access to the benefits of development regardless of nationality, race or gender. This — the Challenge of Inclusion — is the key development challenge of our time.

The Challenges

Notwithstanding the slow and uncertain steps being taken by most African countries to hook on to the Internet and cruise on the Information Superhighway, effective communication (using the multimedia approach) would be very useful in the fight against the hydra-headed scourge of our time — poverty. A lot of positive developments have taken place in the communications sphere where there are communication specialists in various areas of human endeavour. Poverty alleviation is one of the areas that now attracts special attention. The more the problem is focused on, the better for the human race, as “poverty breeds strife and envy, which are more irreconcilable than hatred. It is harder to be poor without grumbling than to be rich without arrogance.” Andrew Cecil (1996).

Poverty, Communication and Governance

A close examination of the existing programmes on poverty alleviation in Nigeria has not taken the message of a new hope and the promised of a better tomorrow directly to the poor people. All that we hear and see are courtesy calls to the powers that be, distribution of bales of money on the national television by political appointees; feeble, ineffectual and irregular publicity in the media and a barrage of Seminars, Workshops, Roundtables, Talkshops and Conferences to which only the “elite poor” are invited. Who then are they planning for? Who are they talking to? Are the poor so inaccessible? Why is it not possible to harmonise the programmes for easy accessibility and utilisation by the non-literate target audience? Will their neglect ever end?

Development communication is an area of specialisation that has so much to contribute to the agenda of reducing the factors that promote ill-being at the expense of a good life and well-being. In

alleviating poverty, its entire accompaniments would have to be addressed — poor education and ignorance, lack of medicare, poor access to food, inadequate shelter, lack of potable water and exclusion from the social and economic life of the community. The communication challenge is therefore making information on all these issues available to all such that leaders who would conduct the affairs of state with utmost respect for transparency and accountability.

Global Communication

In the global village we live in, the ideas and issues that affect one corner of the world no matter how remote makes a difference in all the other parts. Communication, the main feature of this phenomenon, is in a constant state of rapid transition. We are forever passing from one order of practice, goals and circumstance to the other. The circles overlap and change is the common denominator. Information in the hands of many has replaced money in the hands of a few as the new power paradigm in “the village.” As communicators, the response to these new responsibilities must be swift as we would be expected to “develop and deliver consistent messages that are meaningful and persuasive to internal and external audiences regardless of language or location.”

Ethical Practices

As professional communicators, truth and public interest are critical to the calling as one is expected to speak the truth at all times, be the conscience of the society, and a standard bearer of honour, ethics and integrity. We are to eschew any conduct likely to bring the society into a state of anarchy. Such acts include corruption, abuse of office and neglect of the poor and needy. Addressing ethical dilemmas when they arise may save a nation from serious social upheavals. Heads of government should begin to see their roles in governance as that of their nation’s “Chief Ethics Officer” (CEO). Once leadership is by example, through the adoption of a culture of accountability and transparency, it would be easy for the followership to perform their individual and collective roles.

Leadership

In governance as well as in communication, leadership is critical in achieving its developmental goals. Leadership also requires the establishment of a challenging, realistic vision and teamwork. It is the responsibility of communicators to make it known to the leaders that the "command and control" model of statecraft they are so used to is yielding ground to the "inspire and communicate" leadership model. Leaders should be encouraged through definitive informational methods to reject the well-worn language of military (autocratic) management models and metaphors with their implicit message of force and violence. Such expressions as with "immediate effect" should give way to inclusive decision-making that promotes creativity and gives pride of place to morality.

The Press (The Fourth Estate of the Realm)

Communication in the new dispensation should be people-centred, and answer questions of public interest such as: How many people would be affected? How many people stand to benefit? How many people would be injured? How significant are the effects going to be on different people? What short- and long-term effects would it have? Is humanity treated as an end and not merely as a means? To achieve these, it is imperative that communicators need to keep on learning, be aware of and able to use new information technologies and to be active participants of the communication revolution that has become part of our lives.

Much as the military-civil governments in Africa would like to frustrate the patriotic zeal of the press, the latter has to be determined to continue in their role as the "voice of the voiceless". When all hopes are lost and everybody seems to be giving up on the oppressive reign of despots, the press has admirably risen to the occasion — "an oasis of hope in a political desert of despair". Nigeria's most recent experience in the hands of a military dictator is an excellent example. The labour, student bodies, pressure groups, politicians, academia and the entire citizenry were harassed and almost cowed to submission but the press was resolute and won freedom for the over 100 million people in bondage.

Managing Issues and Crises

At one time or the other, a nation experiences some crises in its economic, social and political life. In the past, we read about crisis management almost like a textbook fiction since most problems were seen as being propelled by extraneous forces, rather than self-inflicted aberrations. Things are changing and a creative adaptation of some theories of crisis management we are familiar with are actually capable of tackling knotty social and political problems. Unlike organisational or small-group crisis, the dimensions of government crisis are expansive, complex and difficult to manage. This is due to the fact that far too many people and issues are involved. There have been many crises in Nigeria but the most current of them all and the one that has lingered on the most is the June 12, 1993 election annulment saga by the military government. It has become a classic. For five years, the country's military employed local and international propagandists to "launder" its battered image but the stains of illegality, undemocratic and inept governance, suspended judicial system, incarceration of opposition members, unexplained assassinations, total breakdown of social services, abuse of human rights and gross mismanagement of public funds on futile exercises still remained. The first lesson to learn on managing a crisis is to frontally address the problems that trigger the unfavourable environment and resolve them fairly and justifiably and in good time too. Poverty is a constant issue begging for attention and unless it is properly managed, the citizenry may become too restive for comfort.

Listening to the Community

In this age and time, effective communication has to be "locally global". Well, this simply means that professional communicators require meaningful alliances with grassroots organisations and opinion leaders which serve as third-party endorsement that boosts and makes our messages more credible. There is need to make our communication reach the high and the low with equal impact. Notwithstanding the type of hi-tech that we must relate to, the good old-fashioned face-to-face communication would continue to be relevant in our cultural milieu. Let me expansively quote Richard J. Kelso (1995) on the impact of relationships with the community:

... I wanted a face-to-face meeting with union leadership ... We built a bridge of trust and we both travelled over that bridge a lot of times in the years that followed. We set up grassroots groups of about one hundred employers, with each person assigned to monitor one of the local government units in our service area. When a town council met, we were there — listening. Everyone ~~knew we were there and who our people were. But they also knew~~ our people were empowered to come back and make recommendations. We nipped all kinds of problems in the bud. We headed off a lot of expensive issues because we built relationships. Over time, people came to realise we had a great deal more in common than we had to separate us. This isn't complicated. It's just common sense approaches to people. And that starts with listening.

Surely all the poverty alleviation operatives should consider a unique approach such as this, taking cognisance of the local conditions.

Economic Management

Nigeria ironically is one of the world's leading oil producing nations but just like the typical cobbler whose children go barefooted, its citizens hardly are well served with fuel.

Ironies such as these have made economic development impossible in Africa. Where there are good programmes, implementation indiscipline reduce them to mere paper tigers. The leaders are forever fighting the battles of their lives to perpetuate themselves in power when they have long become irrelevant to the new realities of governance. The pleasure of perks and power have produced in them and their cronies, a narcotic effect that ultimately stagnate the country they govern.

There is need to create an awareness in the people that there is a serious linkage between good economic performance and, open and transparent governance: Whatever political system may be in operation, public economic decisions must be brought to the market place of public opinion for scrutiny. This would not only agree with the free market economy being canvassed, it would also help in building broad consensus without which the best economic policies would

ultimately fail. Such education should emphasise that in a good policy environment, development assistance improves growth prospect and social conditions while economic progress would be retarded and the trend of less productivity and excess consumption of foreign goods would increase. In Nigeria, all the promise of modernising the economy for greater efficiency through encouraging private initiatives have not been implemented — NEPA and NITEL remain hard nuts to crack for business concerns. There is a lot of vacillation and stonewalling on the privatisation of inefficient public companies; thus, commercialisation and other trade liberalisation policies have been stalled because of other agendas that are not in the public interest. Government has no business being in business.

Democracy

“A government intended to last beyond many lifetimes, ought to be a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Abraham Lincoln.

Nigeria, for example, exports democracy to Sierra Leone and Liberia, while it is taking her over 28 years to import the same. In Africa, a rather intriguing search for a peculiar hybrid of democracy is frantically going on. While African despots labour in vain, looking for what is not lost, the message of communicators to the military-politicians, politicians, leaders of thought, and other opinion leaders should be that democracy cannot be remoulded to anything else other than what it has been over the years. If the African governments are desirous of a “home-grown democracy” then it would not have any link with democracy; let them call it “guided democracy”, “military democracy”, and sometimes “African democracy”. Experience has shown that the lure of sheer power makes some African governments “govern everything and everyone, body and soul” all in the name of the good of all, even when it has become a family affair. With their mere wishes becoming reality regardless of its validity, usefulness and feasibility, it is easy to remove khaki and adorn a civil robe and call it guided democracy. It has not worked and this is what good information management by experts such as are gathered here should reverse.

Conclusion

Poverty is not a stand-alone problem. It is a manifestation of bad policy articulation and haphazard implementation. Ideally one would expect governments that have as much as 70 per cent of their citizens living in abject poverty to take it as a challenge and confront it on a sustained basis. The type of elitist and glamorous projects found in the worst-hit countries makes any talk of poverty sound unbelievable. The type of private buildings, government's preference for grandiose projects and expensive international military adventurism contrast sharply with the reality of people who cannot guarantee three meals a day and millions of families going through the harrowing experience of the Sri Lankan woman (earlier quoted). Communicators would necessarily have to take this as a worthy challenge using a multi-media approach so that the desired change will occur. This task would not be easy but it is a worthy cause for the sake of the hapless poor.

The first significant step to be taken is for government to reduce its domineering role in the projects that pertain to the poor by making sure it is not an avenue for creating lucrative jobs for their "boys". Therefore, all the projects that are meant to serve the interest of the poor and down-trodden, particularly the communication aspect, can be harmonised and disseminated. They should be packaged as one to avoid over-establishment and a hijack by the elite. The role of the communicators in this regard cannot be overemphasised.

I thank you for listening.

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