

**INFORMATION OFFICERS AS AGENTS OF MOBILIZATION FOR RAPID  
GRASSROOT DEVELOPMENT,  
BEING A PAPER PRESENTED BY SHU'AIBU USMAN LEMAN, NATIONAL SECRETARY  
NIGERIA UNION OF JOURNALISTS AT THE NATIONAL CONSTITUTIONAL DELEGATES  
CONFERENCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION OFFICERS OF NIGERIA  
(NACOLGION), STATE HOUSE, KAWO, KADUNA, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2008.**

**Introduction**

Let me firstly commend the foresight of Local Government Information Officers who saw the need to come out with this profound initiative of forming such a forum. Among the oldest and largest public information professional organizations in the United States is the California Association of Public Information Officials (CAPIO) founded 57 years ago. This association strives to offer innovative ongoing training and educational opportunities to public information professionals while at the same time, promoting ethics and integrity in public service.

The Local Government Information Officers of Nigeria, I hope will pattern their association in like manner and improve and expand its scope to enable it assume its leadership role in the continent of Africa, as it equally devotes its resources exclusively to representing and meeting the needs of its members.

**Who is an Information Officer?**

I will restrict my definition to the scope of this paper and remark that Information Officers are Communication Coordinators or spokes persons of certain governmental organizations and state governments, local governments and various parastatals. They are equally engaged in the collection and management of information from one or more sources and the distribution of that information to one or more audiences.

Information management is no longer a simple job that can be performed by just anyone. With the latest tools and equipment, Information management has become a powerful resource which entails organizing, retrieving, acquiring and maintaining information, and to perform their duties creditably, Information Officers like all other professionals must be adequately trained and retrained to enable them cope with the rapidly changing dynamics of their assignment.

**Writing Press Releases**

The notion that some information officers hold about their schedule is that of writing Press Releases only. This is wrong and can no longer be accommodated as the main issue

anymore. A good information officer must address the following while writing Press Releases, among other relevant considerations:

- (a) Cover the who, what, when, where, why and how portions of information as soon as possible in the release.
- (b) Double space and print only on one side of the paper
- (c) Releases should be numbered for tracking purposes.
- (d) Releases should be dated. Also include time of release.
- (e) Releases should include a contact person and phone number for more information.
- (f) Insert “for immediate release”
- (g) Multi– paged releases should have numbered pages.
- (h) Insert “more” at the bottom of continued pages.
- (i) Follow up release should contain new information.
- (j) Keep a file on all released information so that reference can be made when needed.

### **Other Responsibilities of Good Information Officers**

Good information officers must be able to inform and educate the masses and change human behaviour or attitudes. They must equally be able to call people to act–mobilization and create positive impressions of the Local Government or parastatal. Good Information Officers must be credible with the media and ensure access to information while at the same time respecting deadlines. They must also keep communication lines open at all times. They should as good Information Officers possess good writing skills, be able to organize thought on paper and know the proper use of grammar and spelling. These are the basis of producing quality documents.

Similarly, information officers must have public speaking skills, write clear outlines and speak confidently and persuasively, establish positive media relationships and remain constantly proactive, anticipate community expectations and plan appropriately. Also, provide timely public information that will help the public make informed decisions about important issues.

Finally, information officers need to know and appreciate their very difficult but important role of providing information to four primary groups, viz: The public, the media, their organization and response groups.

### **Need for Effective Collaboration**

There is a need for effective collaboration between information officers and all stakeholders. Specifically, the following issues should be addressed:

- (1) Identify clearly who is responsible for media relations in the local government,
- (2) What is the relationship between the information officers in the local government and the Press?
- (3) What are the values, perceptions and assumptions of both collaborating groups?

*We can overcome obstacles to effective media relations by applying the following:*

- (a) Working out areas of collaborative work (e.g. Enlightenment).
- (b) Build rapport, empathy and support, but avoid sycophancy
- (c) Maintain openness in communication
- (d) Ensure sincerity of purpose
- (e) Encourage regular press briefings
- (f) Fair, objective and balanced reporting by the media
- (g) Avoid any hidden agenda.

### **Information Officers as Agents for Rapid Grassroot Development**

Growth is one of the indices of development. It means a change in lifestyle or an improvement in one's living condition. Development essentially is not a matter of gross national product but the growth of a new consciousness, the movement of human mind, the uplifting of the human spirit and the infusion of human confidence.

Communication generally promotes development but does not ensure development. In those days, people use the number of media communication to measure development, which was very wrong because access or exposure to the mass media are not good indices of development.

Information in development can only be efficient when communication serves as an element of change in collaboration with all other key segments (sectors or services), such as health, education etc to ensure development. Communication must work to effect equity.

Since people in the rural community are not only marginalized but forgotten, these agents of change, the mass media, the Information Officers should infuse in the people, the ability to do positive things.

### **Rural Community**

A rural community or the grassroot area is an area where people's living condition is very poor. It can be defined by looking at the characteristics of rural areas. These characteristics can be viewed in terms of the location and the people residing in such community, which include high level of illiteracy, low productivity, cultural homogeneity, one way of communication, absence of infrastructure, etc. Based on above facts, one cannot but agree with Shakespeare that *"to be in rural life is to be condemned to death; because life is bad"*.

### **Concept of Rural Community Journalism**

In 2006, at a forum like this in Abuja, I recommended Rural Journalism to Information officers as a panacea for development. I will still adopt that submission with much emphasis.

The essence of Rural Community Journalism is to promote development by using change agents to the villages to bring about mental and material changes. It is this that I am recommending to the Information Officers as one of the main ways forward towards achieving rapid rural transformation.

In the rural areas, there is communication imbalance especially in respect of vernacular version of news; the time allocated on air is too small compared to what obtains in the English version. This is therefore a clear case of imbalance in the flow of information. It is in a bid to correct this imbalance that the idea of rural press cropped up.

Rural Community journalism must play a fine role different from what the urban-based media do. The national and urban media focus on unusual or on odd things in the rural areas. The rural media are to portray the rural people as good and requiring government's action.

Rural Community Journalism is all about process of mental change i.e things that enhance human development.

In other words a rural journalist is not interested in negative things. He goes for mental changes that instill confidence in people to do things confidently and independently, thus enhancing quality of life in the rural areas.

Rural Community Journalism and development are the same because their focus is on all those things that develop human conditions when looked at very clearly. Rural journalism is geared toward promoting better living conditions of the rural dwellers while development journalism also promotes better living conditions but for both the urban and rural people- for instance, a rural journalist can give adequate coverage to a hardworking farmer with a

bountiful harvest. The journalist for example, can highlight how the farmer recorded his success for other farmers to emulate.

Journalism in most cases tends to cater only for a very small percentage of the population, most of whom live and operate in urban areas. In most cases, it is almost safe to say that it is an “*elite*” publishing industry for informing, educating and entertaining a small number of people in the urban areas.

Most newspapers in Nigeria are urban oriented as they cater almost exclusively to the needs and taste of urban audiences who in most cases are far removed from rural realities.

Having then briefly defined and described what rural community journalism is, a big question crops up.

What role can Information officers play, using rural community journalism in Local Government management and Administration and in opening up the rural areas for rapid development?

Generally, the aims of journalism in any society are; to educate, inform and entertain (for whatever purpose). Rural Journalism is basically aimed at enhancing participation of the rural population in the mainstream of day to day activities as development without participation of the majority of the population are often two-sided unrepresentative and negative. The rural newspaper if well utilized can be used to act as forum for transmitting ideas, thoughts, activities, feelings and behaviour from one person to another. And hopefully to the larger human community. Rural media can also be used as catalysts for change and participation in development.

Information officers can use rural journalism to stimulate development programmes which are of direct interest and concern to the rural masses, in disseminating information, education, entertainment, instructions on matters directly concerning the particular rural community in matters such as on health, farming skills, water or road programmes and legislating matters.

Information officers can help Governments especially at Local Levels to promote dialogue at all levels as no government can operate in a vacuum free from the people, using rural journalism.

Rural Community Journalism can service the political system by providing forum for discussions and debate on public affairs, enlighten the public so as to make it capable of

self-government. All these contribute in immeasurable ways to peaceful and resourceful management and Administration of Local Governments.

### **The Way forward – Good Governance**

For Information Officers to effectively assume their position as agents of change, they must utilize the advantages being offered in the media to pursue and ensure that there is good governance at the most important tier of government, which is the local government.

In this regard, they must explore the effectiveness of rural journalism/media, and in doing so, use our indigenous languages to mobilise the masses for effective and meaningful development.

The terms governance and good governance are increasingly being used in development literature. Governance describes the process of decision making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented).

Good governance defines an ideal which is difficult to achieve in its totality. However, to ensure sustainable human development, actions must be taken to work towards this ideal.

Good governance can be understood as a set of 8 major characteristics:

- (1) Participation
- (2) Rule of Law
- (3) Transparency
- (4) Responsiveness
- (5) Consensus Orientation
- (6) Equity and inclusiveness
- (7) Effectiveness and Efficiency
- (8) Accountability.

These characteristics assure that:

- (A) Corruption is minimized
- (B) The views of minorities are taken into account, and;
- (C) The voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision making.

### **Conclusion:**

I have taken the pains to detail the responsibilities of Information Officers and to proffer ways forward through which as agents of change, they can contribute positively to the

meaningful transformation of rural areas. My submission that rural journalism/ media are key factors and tools at the disposal of Information Officers is very pertinent especially if we are to meet the expectations of the Millennium Development Goals, which key imports include the reduction in poverty and hunger, enhancement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equality and women empowerment, reduction in child mortality and improvement of maternal health, combating diseases such as HIV/AIDs, malaria, tuberculosis etc and ensuring of environmental sustainability.

As effective agents of change, Information Officers must effectively use the rural media among other avenues to attain one of the most prominent objectives of the Millennium Development Goals which is to cut by half the absolute poverty levels of member countries, Nigeria inclusive, by 2015. We are however in danger of failure as Sub-Saharan Africa has been singled out as one region that is unlikely to meet this target because of its relative low rate of economic growth.

Finally, as public Information Officers, you must understand the critical importance of developing and maintaining relationship with the media and working closely, the need to stay abreast of the latest trends in the rapidly changing communications industry and the necessity of continuing training and education in order to attain your desired objectives.

Distinguish members of the Local Government Information Officers Association, the choice is yours.

Thank you all and may God bless you abundantly.

### **References**

I am indebted to the following for the above insights and write up:

- International Union of Local Governments (IULA), 1985.
- *Rural Press in Africa: Dialogue Between Cities and Villages*, UNESCO, 1978.
- *The Grassroots Press*: John Cameron Sim, 1970.
- [Wikipedia.org/wiki/ Good Governance](http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Governance)