

Exploring Journalism Practice and Perception in Developing Countries

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Chapter 11

The 2012 Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) Anti-Subsidy Removal Strike Action and Its Implications for Development Communication

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focused on the national strike organized by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) at the dawn of the year 2012 to protest the removal of petroleum subsidy in Nigeria and it explored its implications for development communication. By using documentary research method, the study reviewed relevant literature and discussed the findings. In line with the theoretical framework on which the study is anchored, it observed that the media are powerful medium for carrying development messages to the grassroots. Besides, it also performs watchdog function so as to make the government responsible to the people and allow them to participate actively in the development processes. Therefore, the chapter recommends that government at all levels in Nigeria should ensure adequate participation of the people in the initiation, planning and execution of development projects and policies.

INTRODUCTION

The 2012 National Strike organized by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in conjunction with the Trade Union Congress (TUC) was a reaction to the controversial removal of fuel subsidy by the then Federal Government of Nigeria. Sequel to this, the presidency announced the unilateral removal of petroleum subsidy and adjusted the pump price upward on 1st January, 2012 even when it claimed it was consulting Nigerians. This action received stiff opposition from the organized labour who mobilized the Nigerian masses for a national protest cum mass rally to make their grievances known to the government.

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Prior to this time, there was a subsisting understanding between Congress and the Federal government in 2009 that removal of subsidy will not commence until certain conditions have been met. These include the fixing of all the refineries and building new ones, regular power supply, and provision of other social infrastructure such as railways and repairs of roads as well as eliminating the corruption associated with supply and distribution of petroleum products in the downstream sector of the oil industry (Business Day, 2012). These critical issues were however, not addressed before the controversial removal of petroleum subsidy by the then Federal Government of Nigeria.

After exhaustive deliberations and consultations with all sections of the populace, the NLC, TUC and their pro-people allies demanded that the Presidency immediately reverse fuel prices to N65. They directed that indefinite general strikes, mass rallies and street protests be held across the country with effect from Monday 9th January, 2012, if the Government failed to do so (Business Day, 2012). Besides, since the government was perceived to be unwilling and unable to accede to the yearnings of the people, the strike action and mass rallies held as planned.

Fuel subsidy was before the coming of the Jonathan administration, a policy of federal government meant to assist the people of Nigeria to cushion the effects of their economic hardship. Conceptually, fuel subsidy seeks to enhance financial capacity but also to accept the implied financial losses by it in the spirit of its national responsibility to ensure the well-being of the populace (Onyishi, Eme & Emeh, 2012).

It must be stated that the cost of such strike action is usually heavy on the economy and citizens. Past governments had tried, though not effectively, to enlighten Nigerians on the dynamics of fuel subsidy. The President Goodluck Jonathan's Administration deepened the education with the revelation that the beneficiaries of fuel subsidy were not the masses, but a few wealthy Nigerians and those in the business of importing and distributing fuel (Business Day, 2012).

As a nation, Nigeria has encountered numerous tribulations and crises through her turbulent years of post-independent initiatives and self-rule. Some of the recurrent problems and national issues were occasioned by the country's peculiar circumstances, while others emerged as part of the normal evolutionary and developmental processes. Nonetheless, the country has remained one indivisible nation with functional state and federal systems as well as the presence of fairly active news sources (Okoro, 2013). As far as its economic system is concerned, the national economy is described as a mixed one that allows for a free enterprise, the use of market forces, and foreign exchange market (Okoro, 2013). Hence, the issue under consideration has been recurrent in all the successive administrations since Nigeria gained her independence.

Okoro (2013:542) reported that the country's diverse and pluralistic structure and composition is fundamentally similar to most African nations, especially in the sub-Saharan region in terms of ethnic groups, linguistic pattern, tradition, values, beliefs, and historical origin. With the exception of a few homogeneous nations, Nigeria is one of the numerous heterogeneous African societies that speak several different languages and dialects, have different cultures and political orientation. He added that English language is the lingua franca (official language), and it is widely spoken in many parts of the country as the language of commerce and social interaction.

Although the present day Nigeria is, according to Okoro (2013) composed of thirty-six (36) states and a federal capital territory, Abuja with a total of seven hundred and seventy-four (774) local government areas, the country's origin was traced to the evolution of the three dominant ethnic groups (Igbos, Hausas/Fulanis, and Yorubas) that have influenced and shaped the country's social, cultural, and political experiences.

Therefore, this chapter intends to explore the socio-economic effects of the 2012 NLC anti-subsidy removal strike action and its implications for development communication in Nigeria and/or other nations of the world.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

NLC Strike

This basically refers to the general strike actions, mass rallies and street protests in Nigeria spearheaded by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in conjunction with the Trade Union Congress (TUC) at the commencement of the year, 2012 as a result of the removal of fuel subsidy by the then President Goodluck Jonathan's led Federal Government. This was not the first strike action regarding the subject under consideration and may probably not be the last considering the complex nature of Nigeria and Nigerians.

According to Lakemfa (2015:10), the historic eight-day general strike, mass rallies and street protests in the country from Monday January 9 to Monday January 16, 2012 brought out the best in Nigerians. The Nigerian people were, in his view, angry, and they showed it; sovereignty belongs to the people from whom all power flows, they reasserted it; they displayed that the country belongs to the people and not to the government in power.

Lakemfa further gave a lucid description of the 2012 anti-subsidy removal strike action thus:

The Nigerian populace showed that unity is an article of faith, a theoretical proposition and a practical demonstration of their oneness as a people. It was the best of times; Nigerians put gender and regionalism aside; political affiliation and party loyalty melted in their hearts; no politician, jobber or government could divide them. Daily, they poured out in tidal waves of humanity in their tens of Millions, walking the villages, filling the towns and occupying the cities; men and women, believers and nonbelievers, the ordinary citizens and the movie stars, the preacher and the congregation, the dancer and the vocalist, the student and the teacher, the employer and the employee, the lawyer and the client, the doctor and the patient. When it was time to pray and the faithful bowed down their heads or closed their eyes, protesters of other faith formed human chains around them; guarding and protecting their comrades. Never had Nigerians been so united! It was the most undiluted, peaceful, solid and focused movement of the Nigerian people. They willingly, voluntarily and completely shut down the entire country for eight days; the airspace and the seaports, the offices and the markets, the formal and informal economy. Communities engaged in self-policing and voluntary enforcement of the strikes. A hungry populace most of whom depended on daily work or sales, endured hunger to reclaim their country. It was a beautiful sight and experience never before witnessed in the country; to crown it all, it was peaceful (Lakemfa, 2015:10).

Lakemfa (2015) concluded that when it was time to hold strikes, mass rallies and street protests, the people poured out daily in huge, unprecedented, and sometimes, frightening numbers in unparalleled display of sovereignty, unity of purpose and oneness in thought and action. Yet, when the burgle was sounded by Labour asking the mass to return, within twenty four hours, the jammed streets, the roads that were clogged by human mass, became empty. The multitudes in another unprecedented display of consciousness and collective discipline simply vanished from the streets.

Deregulation

Deregulation policy has globally been embraced by several countries in order to lessen public sector dominance for developing a liberalized market while ensuring adequate supply of products. Such is the story in Peru, Argentina, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, Mexico, Canada, Venezuela and USA, all of which have systematically dismantled their state-owned oil companies through deregulation (Nkogbu & Okorodudu, 2015).

Since 1999, Kwaye (2005) is of the view that the Nigerian government decided to emulate developed and developing oil producing nations by deregulating the downstream sector of her petroleum industry which, hitherto, was monopolized by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Like every policy measure, deregulation will not be without costs. According to him, a cost – benefit analysis always formed sound basis for adopting a particular policy, and it is believed in this case, that the benefits of deregulation outweighs the cost.

To Okafor (2012), Nigeria is not alone in this global trend of attempting to revitalize and develop its downstream sector through liberalization and deregulation in order to increase private sector participation. Thus, deregulation of the downstream petroleum sector, as conceived in 2003, involved not just the removal of government control on petroleum products prices, but also the removal of restrictions on the establishment and operations refineries, jetties and depots, while allowing private sector players to be fully engaged in the importation and exportation of petroleum products and allowing market forces to prevail hence if Nigeria should borrow a leaf from these nations and allow the downstream sector to be fully deregulated, she is sure to have a success story to tell, otherwise, she becomes an onlooker in the polity of oil producing nations. As the recent events unfold, deregulation becomes inevitable (Okafor, 2012).

In addition, Nkogbu and Okorodudu (2015) reported that the monopolistic tendency of NNPC providing all the petroleum products created some features which led to the justification for the deregulation of the sector. The features, according to them include: low level of competition, smuggling of petroleum products, monopolistic and sharp practices, existence of petroleum subsidy, poor maintenance of infra-structural facilities, distortions in products supply and distribution, inappropriate pricing of products supply and high level of fraud and corruption.

They conclude that deregulation of the downstream will provide a more stable and enabling macroeconomic environment that will guarantee safety of, and reasonable returns, on investments. This is, in their view the only encouragement of private sector development and ownerships of downstream infrastructures-refineries, depots, pipelines, and associated facilities. Further business opportunities abound when total or complete deregulation comes into practice. The opportunities include lubricants manufacturing, LPG supply, and fabrication of pumping facilities and accessories as well as local content of enhancement potentials.

Therefore, deregulation can be described as an economic reform, a fiscal and monetary policy measures in which laws or rules of entry and exit into a market are weakened, relaxed or totally removed in order to enhance the competitiveness of economic actors (Adegbemile, 2007). It is the simplification or dismantling of the legal and governmental restrictions in the operation of market forces, especially in relation to price-fixing (Ajayi and Ekundayo, 2008; Ojo, 2010). It is believed that for there to be de-regulation, there must have existed a set of rules, which imposes limitation on how business is conducted within a market. Ojo (2010) explained further that deregulation could easily be conceived as ‘anti-regulation’ or:

The 2012 Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) Anti-Subsidy Removal Strike Action

A situation in which there is absence of regulatory procedure and lack of directive to bring under control, law or constituted authority. It describes a situation in which individual is allowed legally to act as he wants. And to deregulate economy is to give legal backing to individual to fix price arbitrarily of whatever products, goods and services, produced and rendered.

This scenario better explains the Nigeria situation before the era in which government control on petroleum products was relaxed to enhance the competitiveness of economic actors in the industry. However, it should be noted that, deregulation is often in degrees. This definition represents an absolute that may not occur in practice; very often, what we have is the relaxation of government control, the extent of which differs from place to place and for different businesses (Kalejaiye, Adebayo & Lawal, 2013).

According to Bankole (2001) deregulation entails the following elements: - privatization, removal of price control, to a large extent elimination of barrier to participation in all aspects of production, supply and distribution of goods and service by private businessmen. He believes that a regulated market can lead to shortage in supply which will give rise to hoarding and the existence of black market in the economy.

Also, Deregulation, in the view of Umoru (2001), implies the absence of control or regulation of the prices of petroleum products of government leaving the determination of prices to the interaction of forces of demand and supply which also rule out subsidy and encourage competition, efficiency and increased output in the petroleum industries.

Deregulation therefore occurs when the government seeks to allow more competition in an industry that allows more competition in an industry that condones near monopolies hence, a general word that refers to the practice of transforming an economy to one that is open to all interested players and is usually driven by market forces (Anyadike, 2013).

Subsidy

The word “subsidy” first burst into the consciousness of Nigerians in 1987 when the Babangida Regime became the very first to popularize it with the announcement of the removal of 80% of so called subsidy on Premium Motor Spirit (PMS-petrol). That decision led to the increase in the price of fuel, which inevitably escalated inflation in all sectors of the economy. Not unexpectedly, protests and demonstrations erupted in cities around the country, calling on the regime to reverse itself (Social Development Integrated Centre (SDIC), 2012).

In retrospect, when President Ibrahim Babangida initiated the oil subsidy withdrawal, he announced that savings from the cut would be used to develop other sectors of the economy that would ultimately improve the lives of the people. Nigerians did not see that happen. Thereafter, “subsidy removal” became the passphrase ready to be deployed by government in a hunt for quick cash once the country goes “broke” (SDIC, 2012). This has been the experience since inception and likely to remain a recurring one except Nigeria takes the situation seriously by dealing with this nagging issue in her national life.

In another perspective, the issue of fuel subsidy removal dates back to the early 80s. From this period, different governments have sought to reduce or eliminate the subsidy. Such efforts have either been scaled back or abandoned because it is usually met with debates, strikes, protests and other form of opposition. In urban areas especially Lagos and Abuja, there have always been large scale strikes and often serious riots. The arguments from citizens including socialist and moralists is that fuel subsidy is one of the only ways in which Nigerians (especially the poor) benefit from its natural resource endowments (Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2013).

One of the several definitions of subsidy according to Nkogbu and Okorodudu (2015) denotes a social consideration for the majority in a society. They believe that by lowering the price of a commodity (e.g. petroleum products) below the commercial price, those whose buying power is beyond the reach of that essential commodity are able to afford it.

However, Iyobhebhe (2012) said subsidy is a form of price manipulation whereby the government fixes the pump price for sale to consumers and pays the retailer the difference between the actual market price and the regulated or official price per litre. Through fuel subsidy, millions of Nigerians have access to cheap refined petroleum products.

In the view of Akinwale, Olaopa, Ogundari and Siyanbola (2013), fuel subsidy is one of the critical issues that dominate public debate in oil exporting developing nations and among the G-20. In Nigeria, larger proportion of the citizens were seriously resisting the government-planned policy to remove fuel policy which according to them is against the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the government which aim to reduce the number of people living in poverty to less than 50% by 2015. Some public analysts, as Akinwale, *et al.* (2013) observed, believed that the pressure to remove subsidy is designed by experts with insufficient understanding of the Nigerian economy or who choose to ignore the inability of client governments to effectively implement anti-poverty programmes.

Once again, subsidy could be defined as money paid by government or an organisation to reduce the cost of services or of producing goods so that their prices can be kept low (EIU, 2013:3). Before now, major petroleum products being subsidised by the Nigerian government are Kerosene and Petrol. Indeed, the country has long subsidised fuel for the citizens. However economists and international financial institutions have argued for many years that because of the high costs to government, it significantly distorts the economy; stressing that the removal of subsidy would help the economy grow (EIU, 2013).

Some of the reasons the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) proffered for subsidy removal at that time included:

1. The huge unsustainable subsidy burden as a result of current subsidy regime in which fixed price is maintained irrespective of market realities.
2. Subsidy administration is beset with inefficiencies, leakages and corruption and has also resulted in the diversion of scarce resources away from investment in critical infrastructure, while putting pressure on government resources.
3. Huge price disparity has encouraged smuggling of petroleum products across the borders to neighbouring countries where prices are much higher. Nigeria therefore ends up subsidizing consumption of petroleum products in neighbouring countries.
4. Fuel subsidies do not reach the intended beneficiaries.
5. Subsidy has discouraged competition and stifled private investment in the downstream sector.

In the build up to the period under review, President Jonathan reportedly set in motion the thought reform and demanded for purity when he sent the 2012-2015 Medium Term Fiscal Framework (MTFF) and the Fiscal Strategy Paper (FSP) memo to the National Assembly on 4 October, 2011. As the President noted, “A major component of the policy fiscal consolidation is government’s intent to phase out fuel subsidy, beginning from the 2012 fiscal year.”

According to Agbedo and Akaan (2011:5-6), Government defended its decision to deregulate the industry based on the conviction that:

... the huge subsidy being paid on petroleum products has constrained government spending on the development of adequate infrastructural facilities and depletion of national revenue profile; that it encourages inefficient utilization of resources and product smuggling across the borders; that the consumers of kerosene for instance do not buy the product at a regulated/subsidized price set by the government due to distribution bottlenecks, multiple handling and malpractices by marketers; and that fuel subsidy does not encourage healthy competitions among operators as the regulatory environment is controlled by the government.

Citing long term benefit as its main focus, the presidential memo said the gradual removal of subsidies was a step towards deregulating the sub-sector. Moreover, the level of investment in the sector was inadequate, as the four refineries in the country were over-aged at that time and only able to produce about 50 per cent of their installed capacity; and meet only about 40 per cent of the daily 30 million litres domestic demand for refined petroleum products. The drive was to reportedly woo investors who could establish refineries in the country and would be encouraged to do so, since they would get returns on their investments. The removal of subsidy in the 2012 fiscal year was to enable it to release funds for infrastructure and to create jobs, while overall expenditure was likely to rise in the subsequent year (Agbede & Akaan, 2011).

To justify this assertion, Anyadike (2013:25) affirmed that the need to deregulate the downstream oil sector of the Nigerian economy arises from the sorry state of the nation's existing refineries with its concomitant inefficiency in distribution, ineffective and fluctuating price of the petroleum product and the negative tendency of monopolistic structure which has had tremendous adverse effects on the economy. This has, according to him been a contentious issue in national discourse hence the non-availability of petroleum products found beneath our soil in quantum as well as poor pricing mechanism as the price of petroleum product in Nigeria has but fluctuated and skewed against the masses while the government top officials smile to the bank.

This is obviously a valid submission, but it is important to note that the removal of subsidy during the period under review in Nigeria met stiff opposition from organized labour and the masses because it was considered ill-timed in spite of its perceived benefits.

Once more, Fuel subsidy is simply seen as opportunity cost, but rather than come out to impose huge sales tax on Nigerians in its determination to wrest more money from the populace which it can share with the governors, Government at that time claimed it wanted to withdraw fuel subsidy. In the guise of its perceived diversionary debate on fuel subsidy removal, Government reportedly diverted huge sums of money to fictitious groups who produce colourful and expensive adverts published by faceless persons who could not openly identify with the gambit (Lakemfa, 2015:40-41).

The sudden removal of fuel subsidy by the then Federal Government on New Year's Day came at a time the Nigerian public doubted if a subsidy existed. The more conservative opinion felt the timing was wrong. It came at a time government said it was still consulting for a more lasting consensus on the issue. The rush to implement the subsidy removal was seen as an affront by Nigerians. Governance, after all, is about the people. A serious government ought to have taken into consideration the opinion of majority of its citizens (SDIC, 2012).

From all social indicators, Nigerians were already impoverished by the misrule of the political elite. Therefore, the spontaneous nationwide protests that followed what are widely seen as imposition of petroleum tax on the people were not unexpected. Across the country, from Lagos to Abuja, Benin, Ibadan,

Port Harcourt, Calabar, Owerri, Warri, Asaba, Enugu, Abeokuta, Ilorin, Kaduna, Kano, Birnin-Kebbi, Gombe, and Lokoja, it was a boiling pot of anger (SDIC, 2012).

Development Communication

Development communication was, according to Imoh (2013:19) introduced as an integral approach to rural development wherein communication support was provided to communities on issues pertaining first to education and later on to health, agriculture, population, women and nutrition programmes. The application of development communication system models, in her view, derived essentially from dominant economic development theories of the west which emphasized only two of the many social roles of communication, information and persuasion. By implication, such a communication approach has as its main goal, increases in production and consumption, high levels of capital investment and the trickle down of benefits.

Hence, the theories and practice of development communication sprang from the many challenges and opportunities that faced development oriented institutions in the last century. Since then, different schools of development communication have arisen in different places over time (Manyozo, 2006). These schools include the Breton Woods School being the dominant paradigm in international literature and the other schools being the Latin American, Indian, Los Banos, African and participatory development schools. Leading theorists of the dominant paradigm were Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm and Everett Rogers. The paradigm advocated the production and planting of development communication in indigenous and uncivilized societies (Manyozo, 2006).

This paradigm was however criticized by the Latin American school, comprising Paulo Freire, Juan Diaz Bordenave, Luis Ramiro Beltran Alfonso; Gumacio Dagron and Cardoso (Manyozo, 2006). These scholars argued that the dominant paradigm which located the failure of development problems on the underdeveloped countries was inappropriate for all parts of the world; because they failed to address the real underlying problems of poor countries such as lack of access to basic services and therefore advocated participatory communication as the panacea.

The African school of development communication on the other hand, sprang from the content's post-colonial experience. Africa saw the use of radio to promote educational, health and agricultural development especially in francophone countries. With support from FAO, some development programmes in Africa have used participatory communication approaches such as Participatory Rural Communication Appraisal (PRCA) to enhance project results and sustainability (Manyozo 2006).

Development communication is about people who are the drivers of their own development. This is because the people are coming together to identify problems, agree on visions for desirable futures, create solutions and empower the poorest. Also, Anyaegbunam, Mefalopulos and Moetsabi (2004), conceive Communication for Development as the systematic design and use of participatory activities, communication approaches, methods and media to share information and knowledge among all stakeholders in a rural development process in order to ensure mutual understanding and consensus leading to action. The aim, according to them, is to facilitate people's participation at all levels of the development effort to identify and implement appropriate policies, programmes and technologies to prevent and reduce poverty in order to improve people's livelihood in a sustainable way.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter is best situated and explained within the perspective of the Development Media Theory. The theory seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the press in the countries that are conventionally classified together as “developing” or “third world countries”. Therefore, it is not easy to locate this theory in a particular institution or country because it encompasses a great deal of fluctuating economic and political conditions. It is important to consider that India, Brazil and Korea on the one hand; and Nigeria, Togo and Bangladesh on the other, are all lumped together under the category “developing” or “third world” countries. However, a legitimating principle at the time the theory began to emerge—was that there were (and still are) certain common circumstances or characteristics eloping countries that make it difficult to apply the other normative theories to the press therein (Folarin, 2002).

Thus, according to Daramola (2005:178), development media system aims at the following:

1. For the media to catalyse development goals consistent with national objectives.
2. Press freedom which will not undermine the development needs of the society.
3. For the media to promote national culture and languages.
4. For the media to emphasize news and information content which link other development nations with which the country has geographical, cultural and political proximity.
5. Affording media professionals the freedom to deliver on their sacred duties.

The major tenets of the development media theory as summed up by McQuail (1987:121) are as follows:

1. Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.
2. Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society.
3. Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language(s).
4. Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally or politically.
5. Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.
6. In the interest of development ends, the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict, media operation; and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified.

According to Folarin (2002:36), McQuail and other scholars like him certainly deserve credit for their penetrating insight, especially into what appears to be the common line of thinking among leaders of developing countries. But certainly the expression of these principles or tenets can do with some fine-tuning so as to make them more useful (by expressing them in clearer developmental terms) and at the same time in terms acceptable to conscientious journalists, as working guidelines.

Therefore, Folarin (2002:37) suggests a fine-tuning of the principles or tenets of Development Media Theory along the following lines:

1. Media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy (or in line with national ideology), without prejudice to their traditional functions of information, education and entertainment of the public.
2. Media should also accept and help in carrying out the special development tasks of national integration, socio – economic modernization, promotion of literacy, and cultural creativity.
 - a. “National media should give priority in their content to the national macro culture in as far as this can be abstracted from the national milieu; then to regional cultures and then to local cultures, all in a descending order of priority.
 - b. “Regional” media are of course normally expected to accord priority to regional cultures (and languages), while
 - c. “Local” media give priority to local culture(s) and language(s).
3. Media should carefully identify and give due attention in their foreign news to links with, other countries with similar socio – cultural orientations and/or political and economic aspirations.
4. In order to safeguard the ideals of press freedom, journalists and other media workers should at all times faithfully fulfill their obligations and stoutly defend their rights in the course of their information gathering and dissemination tasks.
5. The state with its systems has a duty to see to it that media or journalists presumed to have contravened any national law(s) in the course of their information gathering and dissemination tasks can continually face persecution, expecting a fair and speedy trial.

In line with this study, therefore, the media has the responsibility of accepting and carrying out development tasks in conformity with national established policy and this should be done in the public interest. Also, the media ought to serve as vehicle for development and perform its watchdog function of making the government responsible to the people by allowing them to take part in the developmental processes.

FUEL SUBSIDY STRIKE ACTIONS IN NIGERIA AT A GLANCE

The fuel subsidy strike witnessed at the dawn of 2012 is not the first as far as Nigeria is concerned, and may probably not be the last as long as Nigeria remains a sovereign state. The table below captures the various strike actions occasioned by subsidy removal in Nigeria since the year 2000, as compiled by Adagba, Ugwu and Eme (2012).

Reactions to Fuel Subsidy Removal

The move by the Federal Government of Nigeria at the dawn of 2012 to remove fuel subsidy, which analysts have described as ‘very courageous,’ evoked mixed reactions from across the country. For instance, while some people, particularly the masses, said that it was a loathsome New Year gift from government to its people, others hailed it as a new dawn for the nation’s oil sector and, by extension, the economy which then depended almost 100 percent on the black gold.

In her Analysis on the Editorial Column, *Business Day* (2012) commented thus:

The 2012 Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) Anti-Subsidy Removal Strike Action

Table 1. History of fuel subsidy strike actions in Nigeria between 2000 and 2012

Date	Cause of Strike	Duration	Resolution
June 1, 2000	Prices of petrol increased to N30/litre from N11/litre	Eight days	Price reduced to N20/litre
June 16, 2002	Price increase from N20/litre to N26/litre	Two days	Price retained at N26/litre
June 30 – July 8, 2003	Price increase from N26/litre to N40/litre	Eight days	Price reduced to N34/litre
June 9, 2004	Price increase from N34/litre to N50/litre	Three Days	Government and NLC agreed to a new price of N42/litre
October 11, 2004	Price increase from N42/litre to N52/litre	Three days	Government appointed the 19-member Sen. Ibrahim Mantu Committee on palliatives
September 2005	Price increase from N52/litre to N65/litre	No Strike	Protest by NLC and civil society group led to a cut in price
June 20, 2007	Price increase from N65/litre to N70/litre	Four days	Price reduced to N65/litre
January 1, 2012	Price increase from N65/litre to N141/litre	Eight days	Price reduced to N97/litre

Source: Adagba, Ugwu and Eme (2012).

We salute government's courage in removing the subsidy because we see hope in that action; we see an end to deep-seated corruption in a system that nourishes just a clique of individuals to the detriment of the larger group of citizens; we see local and even Foreign Direct Investment coming in this otherwise viable sector that had been held down by a mindless cabal; we also see competition akin to what obtains in the telecom sector where service efficiency drives and determines demand and price.

To juxtapose this statement, the paper further said:

We are however, not unmindful of the immediate pain Nigerians are being put through, more so when they were not psychologically prepared for the removal when the announcement was made. The sudden increase in pump price at fuel stations by well over 150 percent; the jump in transport fares, price of foodstuff among others, which invariably rubbishes household disposable income, seem to be too much for a people to bear in one fell swoop.

Similarly, the House of Representatives at an emergency plenary on Sunday preceding the strike, voted against President Goodluck Jonathan's removal of the subsidy on petroleum.

According to *the Punch* (2012), the legislators said that the nation could not bear the full deregulation of the downstream sector of the oil industry at that moment and, consequently, asked the Federal Government to revert to the N65 pre – January 1 pump price of petroleum. However, the House also appealed to Labour to postpone its threatened strike action in favour of dialogue which is the basic ingredient in any development communication process.

Still on fuel subsidy removal, Adagba *et al.* (2012) believe that deregulation could be attained in phases. What is, according to them, wrong in increasing the price to say N70 or N75 for the 2012 fiscal year? They noted that the increment in question could be spread over a period of ten years or more and the palliative ought to have been provided before government contemplated any subsidy removal. Nigerians were, in their view, already saddled with high NEPA bill, high cost of kerosene, diesel and then government added petrol. Yet the minimum wage was still at N18, 000 as at that time.

On the contrary, the then Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Sanusi Lamido Sanusi was one man who had backed the calls for the removal of the subsidy. “Subsidies should be subsidies for production and not for consumption,” he told the BBC’s Focus on Africa programme.

In a related development, Onanuga (2011:3) cited in Onyishi, *et al.* (2012) quoted Sanusi Lamido as saying “If we borrow to subsidize today, it is our children that are subsidizing us; let us take a difficult decision today and make tomorrow better by supporting the removal of subsidy”.

Above all, the House of Representative Committee charged with investigating the management of funds related to fuel subsidy began public inquiry into the process of subsidy payments by the then Federal Government to select licensed marketers of petrol and kerosene. This was due to the protests that greeted the fuel subsidy removal of the President Goodluck Jonathan’s led administration.

Farouk Lawan’s Probe Panel and Startling Revelations

One of the ugly details discovered from the probe by the ad hoc committee of the Federal House of Representative was that Nigeria over – imported petrol on a daily basis to the tune of 24 million litres in 2011. The house however found that Nigeria did not have sufficient storage capacity to accommodate the surplus (Eze, 2012).

The bombshell, according to Eze (2012), began when the Petroleum Minister of that era, Mrs. Diezani Alison-Madueke provided the statistics indicating Nigeria’s daily consumption of fuel as 35 million litres. But the then Executive Secretary of the Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA), Reginald Stanley, disclosed that the volume of fuel actually imported was 59 million litres per day.

Therefore, the house noted that the difference between fuel consumed and fuel imported was 24 million litres. Since Nigeria paid subsidy on this number of litres that was not even utilized by Nigerians, the implication was that Nigeria paid approximately N670 billion on petrol it did not even consume the previous year.

In reaction to this revelation, Eze (2012) added that the Chairman of the House Committee, Farouk Lawan said, “How could the nation be made to pay for 59 million litres daily when we only consumed 35 million litres daily? The balance of 24 million litres per day might be the area of sharp practices. By making that provision, you are encouraging smuggling because we know that this 24 million litres balance would simply be smuggled out of the country, since it has been already been paid for and we cannot consume it.”

In another development, the investigative hearing also found that the government had breached the constitution by engaging in extra-budgetary spending without appropriation from the National Assembly (NASS). In 2011 fiscal year for instance, only N245 billion was appropriated for subsidy, but the government ended up paying over a trillion naira for same (Olaoye, 2012).

The then Finance Minister attempted to explain that the fund set aside to finance the subsidy in the expenditure framework submitted to the NASS in the 2011 was meant for just two months’ consumption

with the assumption that the government would remove subsidy that year. She could not however answer the salient question on why the government refused to present the remaining balance of about N1trillion as a supplementary appropriation proposal for approval by the National Assembly (Olaoye, 2012:2).

However, in 2011 alone, Ejue and Okeyim (2013:13) found that the fuel subsidy cabal had frittered away between N1.3 - N1.6 trillion (about \$8.125-10 billion) from the coffers of the federal government even when budgetary allocation for subsidy was N800 billion (about \$5 billion). In fact, the Central Bank of Nigeria, the Ministry of finance, the Ministry of petroleum resources, and the budget office were all giving conflicting figures. The uncovered magnitude of the fuel subsidy scam has justified the street protest.

Therefore, corruption could be said to be the bane of the recurring crises in the oil sector of our economy. With the foregoing revelations, it is clear that the downstream sector in Nigeria is enmeshed in circles of corruption which the then Federal Government tried to address through the mechanism of deregulation, which could have served as a better option if the government had consulted widely.

The Socio-Economic Effects of the Anti-Subsidy Removal Strike

A strike action of this magnitude has no doubt affected the socio – economic conditions of Nigeria and Nigerians alike. According to Adagba *et al.* (2012:70), the nation's economy was literally put on hold while the strike was on. Schools, petrol stations, banks and markets were shut down in compliance with the order. In some major cities across the polity, there were disruptions of movement by anti-subsidy removal agitators who set bonfires on the roads. In most streets in the metropolis, idle youths were seen playing football, while in some areas hoodlums exploited the strike and had a field day.

Therefore, all the efforts made by the then Federal government of Nigeria during the period under review to persuade the people to shun the strike action was futile as they refused to accept all palliatives offered by the government other than the reduction in the pump price of petroleum products.

Fuel subsidy removal automatically leads to increase in the pump price of fuel. This was shown by the difference pump prices witnessed across the country when the subsidy removal was announced and these ranged from N141 to N200 naira per litre. In some other states especially eastern states of the country, a litre of petrol was sold for as much as N250 naira. Other marketers created artificial scarcity in order to raise the pump price. Therefore, certain sectors of the economy were adversely affected (George, Elegbeleye, Chukwuedozie & Idowu, 2014).

More so, the effect of the crippling strike and protests was profound on the nation's money market as banks remained under lock and key while the strike lasted. For instance, many Ghanaians businessmen having business transactions with Nigerian banks in Ghana, also complained bitterly about the strike. The Ghana branches need approvals from their headquarters before they can take some decisions. The implication here is that whatever happens in Nigeria necessarily affects political and economic activities in the West African region. The then Governor of Central Bank, Lamido Sanusi Lamido put the loss incurred during the period of strike at \$617million daily, translating into about N100 billion (Akanbi & Agbo, 2012:24).

There is no doubt that every segment of the economy was adversely affected afterwards as the Union exercised their right to strike. Economic Watchers observed that the strike led to the Nigerian economy losing about N720billion owing to the fact that business activities were crippled that period. During this period under review, business activities were completely shut down with exception to the

Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE) where trading was skeletally done and the official market of the foreign exchange (Forex) where the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) managed minimal transactions on Monday and Wednesday. The stock market that was hitherto epileptic suffered more downward trend (Centre for Public Policy Alternative, 2012).

In the other sectors, Nwafor, Ojujiuba and Asogwa (2011) in Ekwoaba and Ikeije (2016) reported that the cost of transportation rose, particularly the inter-city transport which increased by about 120% as transporters complained of the non-availability of fuel and the chaotic queues at petrol stations. Conversely, passengers lamented about the outrageous increase in fare. This made a negative impact on the prices of goods and services all over the nation.

Also, Nwanne (2014:118) reported that the strike was devastating in its impact. According to him, mass protests were organized in Lagos, former capital and epicentre of Nigeria's radicalism; Ilorin, Benin, Abuja, Kano and other towns in the country. Even though the organizers had called for peaceful protests, it could not be said to be entirely peaceful as security agents overreacted here and there which led to the death of some persons.

However, the strike reportedly had some good sides as the so-called cabals who had held the entire country at ransom were held accountable for their woes for the first time. For once in recent times, the trade union held the government to a fruitful showdown that called for probing of different parties associated with this. Public office holders were made conscious of accounting for the office they occupy. One significant point of this strike is the fact that there were exposures of what happens behind the scene and those in government are now more conscious of good governance and proper accountability. It is obvious that the Labour Union sought a redress through negotiation and finally a downward review of the increased pump price of petrol (Anyim *et al.*, 2012 cited in Ekwoaba & Ikeije, 2016).

In addition, Ejue and Okeyim (2013:13) noted that the vision of the street protest went beyond the agitation for restoration of the withdrawn percentage of fuel subsidy. The under-current was, according to them a push for anti-corruption policies, transparency, efficiency and institutional reforms. For instance, the protest led to fuel subsidy probe by the House of Representatives which was very revealing. Consequent upon the probe, they added that the big oil marketing companies involved in the subsidy racket have been exposed and their strategies ranged from round tripping of petroleum products to outright sharing and pocketing of the money that was meant for fuel subsidy.

Ejue and Okeyim (2013:15) explained further that the anger expressed at the street protest also anchored on other economic indices such as unemployment, which according to the National Bureau of Statistics, then stood at 23.9% which was a steady rise from the 5.3% in 2006; below UN poverty line of one dollar per day; failure of infrastructure such as electricity, medical care, education, poor state of roads; and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Even when government and labour negotiated and reached a compromise by pegging the pump price of petrol at N97 per litre, these scholars believed that the protesters demanded a transparent process of handling the gains of the subsidy withdrawal and bringing those who have been abusing the system to justice.

Finally, as an offshoot of the protest, government decided to probe into the beneficiaries of the subsidy which it claimed was just a few people who constituted themselves into a cabal. From the probes by both National Assembly and independent groups, it is obvious that a few people have cornered the petroleum industry and shared it like a spoil of war (Ekwoaba and Ikeije, 2016). This is not a good omen in a diverse and 21st Century nation like Nigeria.

Thus, it is pertinent to explore the implications of this anti-subsidy removal strike action for development communication.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE STRIKE FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

A strike of this magnitude portends great implications for development communication. As mentioned earlier, development communication is about people who are the drivers of their own development. According to the Communication for Development Roundtable (CDR) Report (2005), Communication for Development is a two-way process – it is about people coming together to identify problems, agree on visions for desirable futures, create solutions and empower the poorest.

Going by this definition therefore, it is expedient to note that President Goodluck Jonathan's announcement of fuel subsidy removal at the dawn of the year 2012 failed to gain popular support from the masses. This is because the people were not involved in the developmental processes which could have been facilitated by the media at that time. Involving the people right from the planning stage to the implementation stage is central to the success of any developmental oriented programme or project. This is why development communication scholars believe that the people should be allowed to be the drivers of their own development. Therefore, the anti-subsidy removal strike action would have been averted if the government had adopted this approach.

To buttress this, Anyaegbunam *et al.* (2004) assert that Communication for Development could be applied to all development sectors that rely upon the choices and actions of people to succeed. It is, in their view, not limited to promoting agriculture alone, but also assists programmes for nutrition, health, gender, population and reproductive health, livestock, forestry, environment, literacy, income generation, sustainable livelihoods and other key areas. It usually focuses on the needs of communities and those organizations working with them. It empowers all stakeholders, especially the poor in rural and urban areas, to contribute actively to the decision-making processes of development as a whole. This agrees with one of the key principles of the Development Media theory which suggests that the government can mobilize the media to serve national goals in terms of economic and social development needs.

To corroborate the foregoing thought, Mefalopulos (2008) affirms that development communication, with its dialogical and explorative connotation, can facilitate empowerment through specific training or by creating the space for working cooperatively on specific initiatives at an individual, institutional, or community level. By taking part in decisions concerning their own lives, even the most disenfranchised and marginalized individuals tend to gain confidence and feel more empowered. Whenever communication is applied to facilitate dialogue, knowledge exchange, and joint assessment of the situation, stakeholders' participation and empowerment grow. Consequently, the chances for setting and achieving sustainable projects' objectives increase as well, according to him. This emphasizes the fact that stakeholders' participation is the focal point in all development communication interventions.

Therefore, stakeholders and communication analysis are the critical issues in development that the Federal Government of Nigeria failed to put into consideration on the issue of fuel subsidy removal at that time. For any development venture to be successful there is need for a good stakeholders' analysis. This is by treating the people as co-researchers and involving them right from the problem identification and prioritization stages, thereby collaborating with them to proffer solutions to the problems already identified. At the end, they would be empowered to contribute actively to the decision making processes of development as a whole.

Similarly, communication analysis is also imperative in any developmental initiative, hence it occupies central position in any given intervention in all facets of human endeavour. Communication analysis is of immense importance because it helps in the selection of an appropriate medium or combination of media for a targeted audience. Since there is no best medium, it is expedient to choose the medium that

best suits an audience. In the case under review, however, the appropriate medium of communication was not chosen by the Federal Government to educate the masses on the gains of subsidy removal and communicate her intentions to them to change their prejudice and apathy on the subject under review. To avert the controversy that surrounded government's action at this period, the media could have been used to mobilize the people to re-orientate them on the potential gains of subsidy removal prior to the action. This scenario is contrary to the underlying factor behind the birth of the Development Media Theory that there should be no development without media communication.

Thus, in line with the core assumption of the Development Media theory, the media have the primary responsibility of seeking to promote the socio-economic development and transformation of society; thereby performing her watchdog function of making government responsible to the people rather than indulge in the trivial and sensational. On this note, the media has the potential to serve as a catalyst for development in any nation of the world.

On the contrary, it is expedient to note that NLC adopted and used participatory approach to elicit popular support for the 2012 subsidy removal strike action which resulted in mass protests in many cities and states in Nigeria. This decision forced the Federal Government to embrace negotiations and dialogue as a way of resolving the national strike organized by Labour. This is to say that the strategy adopted by the NLC paid off on the long run. As a result, the government explored avenues for dialogue with key stakeholders on the probable ways of resolving the crisis that greeted the removal of fuel subsidy in the early days of that year.

Therefore, the success of that NLC strike shows the potentials of dialogue and participatory approach in any development programme or project. Succinct to say that the fuel subsidy removal policy of the Federal Government hit the rock because the government failed to consult widely, and to also employ the use of participatory action which is the main crux of development communication. It is also crucial to note that the strike assumed a new dimension and was eventually suspended when the government embraced dialogue and varied forms of negotiations with Labour. This however, led to a cut in price of petrol from N141 per litre to N97 per litre at that time.

This also agrees with the conclusion of Ejue and Okeyim (2013) that the first major implication of this street protest in Nigeria was that at long last, there is a growing accountability building up in the Nigerian system. Gone were the days people in government would just get up in the morning and announce the implementation of a policy that is not in the interest of the people. The practice of unaccountability and mismanagement in government would, according to them soon be a thing of the past as the common citizens and ordinary Nigerians are becoming aware and informed about government's activities. It was unbelievable and surprising, following the few days of the protest and shut down of various sectors, for one to imagine that anything other than a policy reversal will be announced by the Nigerian government.

To this end, it is vital to note that no matter what kind of project—agriculture, infrastructure, water, governance, health—it is always valuable, and often essential, to establish dialogue among relevant stakeholders. Dialogue is the necessary ingredient in building trust, sharing knowledge and ensuring mutual understanding. Even a project that apparently enjoys a wide consensus, such as the construction of a bridge, can have hidden obstacles and opposition that the development communication specialist can help uncover, address, and mitigate (Mefalopulos, 2008).

In addition, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2012) revealed that the real cost of any socio-economic disturbance is the tragic but avoidable loss of human life, the value of which cannot be accurately computed. Hence, the NBS relied on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to estimate the monetary value of economic activity “lost” during the strike. In this regard, it was estimated that the nation lost N207, 408.28 million during the eight – day strike.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discourse has revealed the implications of the 2012 NLC Strike for development communication. Although the strike action affected the economy of individuals, group and even the entire nation within the period of its execution, it has greatly changed the orientation of the government at all levels on the issue of governance. This is because the government is now aware that successful development calls for the conscious and active participation of the intended beneficiaries of an intervention programme or policy at every stage of the development process.

Therefore, the anti-subsidy removal strike action has proved the validity of the submission by Me-falopulos (2008) that whenever communication is applied to facilitate dialogue, knowledge exchange, and joint assessment of the situation, stakeholders’ participation and empowerment grow. Hence, the media is expected to serve as a vehicle for development and also perform its watchdog function of making the government responsible to the people by allowing them to take part in the developmental processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above, the paper recommends as follows:

- Government should always ensure adequate participation of the people in the process of initiating and executing development projects and policies in Nigeria.
- The mass media should live up to its responsibility of checking the excesses of government at all levels through its day-to-day reportage.
- At all levels of government, preference should also be given to public and national interest at the expense of personal interest whenever the need arises.

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