Media and development – Where's the Gap?

John Davison, the Head of Media at Christian Aid has begun his personal visiting research fellowship at Polis with a research seminar at which he outlined his plans for a study of the relationship between journalism and NGOs in Africa.

Here are his notes, written in a personal capacity, sketching out the scope of his research plans. If you are interested in these issues please get in touch with John at j.h.davison@lse.ac.uk

Media and Development – Where's The Gap

By John Davison

First impressions

An initial look at the field indicates that there is a broad consensus between researchers, UK government and the relevant parts of the UN in three main areas:

·   The central importance of Accountability/Good Governance in efforts for international development and poverty eradication.

·   The central importance of a free, pluralistic and independent media in order to achieve such levels of governance by holding developing country governments to account.

·   The vital importance of local/indigenous input into the development of such a media industry and culture.

Equally, however, there is also a discernable sense of frustration and disappointment about how far progress has been made in these areas – or even the extent to which it is recognised in the wider Development debate. Mostly, there seems to be a gap between the finely tuned academic debate and what has actually been achieved in practice on the ground (NB POLIS conference, March 2007; Mansell and Nordenstreng 2006 – 'Great Media and Comms Debates: WSIS and the McBride Report').

So, where is the gap in the media/development debate – and who should fill it?

Personal experience

The analysis/study of the role of media and other communications in development goes back more than 50 years. I know this because a paper from the LSE's own Linje Manyozo, given to the 50th anniversary conference of the International Association of Media and Communication Research in 2007, tells me so.

While fascinated to learn about this and to track the various changes of emphasis and academic fashion over that period, I was mostly surprised. Because for almost half of that period I have been working either in national/international news or for a major development NGO. Or, on some occasions, both. And yet this was not a debate that I had encountered until about 18 months ago.

This seems to tell you one of two things – or both:

- Journalists live in a media bubble that is short-term, deadline-driven and have never taken the time to engage with the wider debate about what we do.
- The mainstream of development policy and theory is divorced from this particular area of debate or sees it as a periphery matter.

But each, in fact, is only partially true.

My own involvement in media and development matters goes back to 1994 when I wrote extensively about the Pergau dam in Malaysia that had been funded from the UK development budget as a sweetener for a huge arms deal. Those efforts, and the efforts of others chasing the story, led to a major scandal and the government being forced to repay the £234 million pounds involved to the aid budget.

So here is the UK mainstream media heavily engaged in a debate about international development, working with parliamentarians and NGOs to force a change in government policy through media exposure. In other words, an object lesson in the media's ability to influence Governance/Accountability.

At Christian Aid I have been working on what has been called Media *ABOUT* Development – getting Development issues and debate into the mainstream UK media. This is a different process, but it has required me to understand such alien concepts as 'micro-credit', 'coping mechanisms' and 'capacity building of civil society actors'. The fact that I have only recently encountered media *FOR* development must be because it has not previously been on the mainstream NGO agenda.

The importance of media as an advocacy tool is, however, well recognised within the NGO world – in developing countries as well as in the UK (eg Janadesh 2007). Christian Aid, and others, invest heavily in media operations – for campaigning and lobbying/opinion-forming purposes as well as for fund-raising.

There is also, in UN speak, substantial if uncoordinated investment in 'communications in support of development sectors' – funding media outlets to promote practices on HIV/AIDS, peace building or FGM (female genital mutilation).

So, what is the problem?

The Big Picture

For the past decade, much of the debate within development NGOs has been dominated by what may be called Big Ideas, or what has elsewhere been called Big Push ideas. Foremost among these has been the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). But there has also been 'Make Poverty History', the 'Commission for Africa' and a proposed 'Marshall Plan for Africa'.

These are the sexy areas to be involved with – conjuring big figures and big promises and generating big headlines. While issues of governance and, to an extent, media for development, are implicit in all of these initiatives, they are not the things that get the attention (eg MDG 7). Bed nets etc – even the highly unglamorous sector of WatSan gets more attention.

From the NGO perspective, there are a number of reasons for this.

·   The traditional dominance of economic theory in the formulation of development policy and theory – poverty is all about money, right?

·   Emergence of new policy specialisms to deal with specific, high profile campaigns – like climate change or tax.

·   Reluctance of NGOs to get involved. 'It's not our business'. Plus an ideological resistance to overshadowing the voices of the south by meddling in local media matters.

·   Cost benefit analysis. Not in a position to make that call – lack of expertise/practical policy.

I also think that the very breadth of the area 'Media and Communications for Development' can be a part of the problem – covering everything as it does from the digital divide to mobile phone prevalence to journalists' training. This very breadth gives practitioners the excuse to do nothing – once again 'it's not our business'.

Within this critique, I agree with the analysis that too much emphasis has been given to various technological breakthroughs as potential 'magic bullets' that have demonstrably failed to deliver. A clear distinction needs to be drawn, I believe, between the generation of stories/messages and how they are distributed.

Now – the right time?

On the face of it – it's looking good.

- 2006 DFID White Paper – 'Eliminating World Poverty: making governance work for the poor'. Emphasis on importance of media (going back to Commission for Africa).
- 2007 UN Economic Commission for Africa – 'African Framework for the Development of a Sustainable and Pluralistic Media.
- 2008 Africa Media Initiative – run by African media professionals.   Comes out of AMDI and STREAM.
- 2009 BBC World Service Trust – Governance and the Media survey.

Plus, the debate is shifting within parts of NGO sector on the nature of poverty and the most effective ways to address it. At Christian Aid, for instance, this year saw the publication of an important policy document 'Justice to Poverty' (J2P) which rejects the purely economic analysis of poverty and instead sees it as more of a question of power relationships. Again, this chimes well with much of the current Media for Development debate in terms of empowering citizens with the means to make informed choices in a democratic process.

INGOs – the right place?

Could/should international development NGOs now be taking major role in Media for Development initiatives?

Could this be where the gap between research and practice is bridged?

Traditional positioning of NGOs looks ideal

- Established infrastructure/presence in target countries.
- Very high level of local/indigenous involvement. Demand?
- Loud voice with institutional donors.

On the other hand, could this lead to accusations of neo-colonialism, if NGOs are seen to be taking control of parts of the media process? How would the divide be drawn between an NGO pursuing its Media About Development agenda, including for fund raising purposes, and supporting a wider Media For Development process?

Case Study

Public Agenda – Accra, Ghana.

Owned/funded by ISODEC, a local NGO, but with independent editorial board. High impact on government policy/action – eg water privatisation.

How came to know PA. Research proposal – interviews with PA staff, plus media experts/trainers. What has been achieved? What might be possible? How does this model sit within the AMI?

New battle over proper use of oil revenues – wishing to avoid 'resource curse'. But also constant battle for funding/survival.

Model for future NGO/institutional funding involvement?

Plus: Media in Nigeria. Control or basket case?

Preliminary Conclusions

I am here at Polis/LSE because I want to produce a piece of research that will stand up to academic scrutiny. But as a practitioner, I am also looking for practical solutions that can at least point a workable way forward in the area of furthering pro-poor objectives through the strengthening of media in developing countries – its capacity and culture.

I am not looking for a magic bullet – not after an answer to the whole conundrum. But I do want to find something that might just work.

As a result I will be focusing quite tightly on what I know, which is journalism and the news media. I will not, for instance, be dwelling on issues surrounding Information Communication and Telecommunication (ICT) capacity and technology transfer. It is not that these things are not important, it is just that I think they are best left to people who know more about them. Again, in UN speak, I will be concentrating on the area of 'Communications in Governance'.

Overall, I do think there is a need to re-focus on the actual business of producing media content that can serve the Development agenda in the way that so many players agree is vital. This is about the voice that is needed to effect change as well as the means of delivering it. It is also about focusing on the function of the media – in and of itself – as an activity that by its nature can promote the desirable ends of greater accountability and so better governance to better serve poor people.

This is obviously the beginning of a process. But it seems to me that what is needed is a clearer theoretical basis, acknowledged within the NGO world, of how the media can be a vital part of the fight to eradicate poverty – integral to which must be an analysis of *how* this might be achieved as well as why. I hope that this research can contribute to such an understanding.

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All views in this article and anything written during John's fellowship are entirely his personal opinion.