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**VOICES**

# Making poverty the story

Time to involve the media in poverty reduction

Promoting dialogue, debate and change

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This report is available at [www.panos.org.uk/poverty](http://www.panos.org.uk/poverty)

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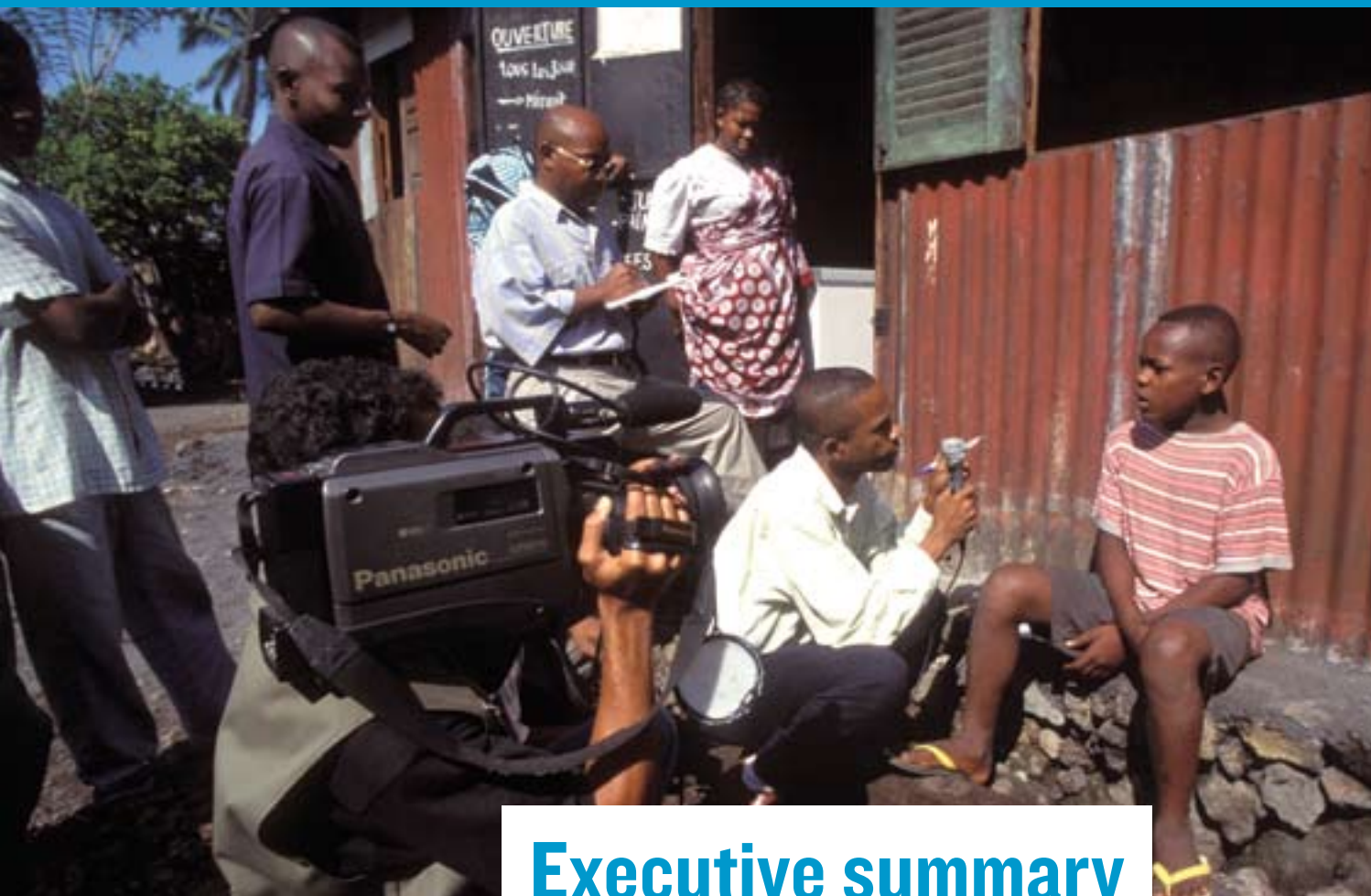
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### Abbreviations and acronyms

AWC	African Woman and Child Feature Service
CDF	Constituency Development Fund (Kenya)
CSO	civil society organisation
CSPR	Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (Zambia)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
GBC	Ghana Broadcasting Corporation
GCRN	Ghana Community Radio Network
HIPC	heavily indebted poor country
IFIs	international financial institutions
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NDPs	national development plans
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRSP	poverty reduction strategy paper
RAPP	Rich and Poor Project (Kenya)
SAP	structural adjustment programme
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
WTO	World Trade Organization
ZNBC	Zambia National Broadcasting Company





## Executive summary

The media can play a part in highlighting the challenges of poverty reduction, engaging with people living in poverty and reporting the issue from their perspective. Here a street child from the Comoros Islands talks to a journalist.

GIACOMO PIROZZI | PANOS PICTURES

### Poverty reduction, public debate and the media as vital public goods

As the mid-point for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 is reached with progress in serious doubt, this report argues that the time has come for all policy actors to recognise and support the potentially crucial contribution of the mass media to efforts to reduce poverty in low-income countries. Policy change has often stemmed from shifts in public and political opinion, and the very reach of the mass media make them a vital force in raising public awareness and debate, even if they may not be direct policy actors or even consider themselves as having an obligation to influence policy and change society.

High-quality public service and public interest journalism in particular, the report argues, should be supported as public goods<sup>1</sup> in their own right, and those wishing to encourage the media to strengthen its coverage of poverty reduction should recognise and support the ability of relevant parts of the media, in principle, to play such critically independent roles.

The report notes that poverty, as witnessed by the public action accompanying the MDGs, has climbed up the political agenda. Reducing poverty has been transformed from a 'worthy cause' to a challenge in the public eye that is much more newsworthy for journalists. This offers significant opportunities for those wishing to engage the media.

### PRSPs and beyond: participation, communication and the media

A key reference point for the report's case for stronger involvement of the media on poverty reduction in low-income countries is governments' introduction of World Bank-approved and -supported Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). The PRSP approach has been the most significant policy innovation to date on poverty reduction.

<sup>1</sup> 'Public goods' is an economic term referring to goods which, once produced (or existing), benefit all members of a society – for instance, peace, clean air, education or judicial systems

Not only are the vital issues at stake in PRSP policy-making of potential interest to the media and those wishing to engage journalists (such as the transparency of national budgets); the stated principles of PRSPs (such as 'stakeholder participation' and 'national ownership') are also relevant to debates about the media's role. As highlighted by the World Bank, communication strategies are indispensable to involving the public – and poor people – in PRSPs.

In the context of heated debates about the record of PRSPs and the role of communication within them, the first section of the report notes the changing policy approaches to poverty reduction and highlights the potential roles that the media could play. These include:

- communicating with and informing a wide range of audiences on poverty reduction issues
- providing an open forum to reflect different public views, including those of poor people
- providing an inclusive platform for public debate
- scrutinising and holding all actors to account for their actions, acting as a force for more transparent and accountable decision-making relevant to poverty reduction.

### Challenges and constraints

For all the mass media's potential, the second section of the report draws attention to the inter-related challenges and constraints that hinder the ability of journalists to perform these public service<sup>2</sup> and public interest<sup>3</sup> roles as effectively as they and others might wish. Indeed, in many of the poorest countries, particularly in Africa, the media is still an infant industry struggling to find its feet.

The report therefore urges all policy actors, including international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donors, not just to recognise the media's potential as a much-needed independent, indirect contributor to the development process, but also to understand and help address the sector's own multiple development support needs. With both policymakers and civil society organisations (CSOs) stressing the importance of 'good governance', the report argues it is crucial to support the potential power of the media's highly relevant scrutiny role.

### Commercial and political pressures on the media

One major constraint noted is the pressures of commercial survival and growth in the wake of recent media liberalisation. While increased media freedoms have been welcome in the wake of state controls on communication, heightened competition threatens diversity of coverage and quality of content as the increased number of media players standardise outputs in pursuit of conventional, better-off audiences. In this climate poverty reduction may not be seen as an 'attractive' subject, with mainstream public affairs reporting tending to focus on subjects such as personality-based coverage of elite politics. The need for advertising revenue has similarly often compounded the pressure on editorial space, also making the media more vulnerable to outside commercial and political pressures of various kinds.

### Resource and expertise problems

The structural problems of media finance affect working journalists, who are often under-skilled, under-trained, poorly paid and precariously employed. Time and resources may not be available to fund the research needed for stories on poverty reduction, especially ones informed by poor people's views. In turn, journalists may lack the knowledge and practical skills to

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Public service journalism involves media content that is valued for its intrinsic merit based on the highest professional standards and wider benefits for society and not just for its commercial worth. Panos London defines the essential features of public service media as 'accessibility (including by poor and marginalised people) and quality content that is true, informative and reflects different voices and perspectives'. It argues that a public service role is not confined to publicly-owned or community media but can also be fulfilled by, for example, the commercial media, alongside its other functions. See Panos London (2007) *At the heart of change: The role of communication in sustainable development*, p23

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Public interest journalism involves media content that provides citizens with access to information on key aspects of public life significantly affecting their well-being and involvement. Such coverage yields benefits for society as a whole as a result of the public's right to know about issues that may have been neglected or unexplored in public discourse or illegitimately kept confidential or secret by public and private power-holders. Public interest journalism thus plays its own independent, vital role in sustaining the public awareness, debate and participation needed if citizens are to exercise their rights and responsibilities effectively in democratic societies. By bringing crucial information into the public domain, it encourages accountable governance and supports the ability of citizens to hold all power-holders to account

gather and decipher the growing range of information and analysis on poverty reduction issues. They are hindered also by frequent official secrecy, bureaucratic red tape and an apparent ingrained tendency to rely on state and government sources of information, even when in short supply or difficult to access. The report notes, however, that as a result of PRSPs, some governments have made progress in official information-sharing and public communication. Official media relations capacity could be strengthened as part of continued progress.

But, the report notes, many journalists are unable or unprepared to track down and use alternative information sources, missing out on stories. This weakness is not only due to skill deficiencies, but reflects problematic professional practices associated with the alleged shortcomings of 'event-' and 'statement-based' reporting, which, though a crucial media activity, often lacks analytical depth.

### Opportunities

A key opportunity identified is the unrealised potential of better understanding and working relations between civil society and the media. Interaction has often been impaired by misunderstandings and misplaced assumptions and expectations of each other's role and practices.

Given media resource problems, this situation has often led to the media and journalists accepting or being offered payment by civil society organisations to cover their 'stories' or to carry pieces that they have written themselves. Whatever the possible short-term benefits for communicating with the public on poverty reduction issues, these practices can often be questioned on the grounds of the outputs' journalistic worth and longer-term sustainability.

### Civil society and the media: towards better interaction

The report argues that civil society must develop a stronger understanding not just of the constraints and pressures journalists deal with, but also a greater appreciation of their professional needs and how to meet them. Conversely, the report argues that the media, in its coverage of poverty reduction, has much to gain through stronger interaction with civil society. The benefits include sources, insights and contacts and greater familiarity with the issues at stake, as seen by those often working closely with or seeking to represent poor people. One of civil society's concerns is that the media can often lack a sensitive, rigorous grasp of policy issues and the practical and political challenges of work with poor people and policymakers.

### Engaging and exploring the views of editors

Highlighting the example of one recent initiative with editors in Kenya (which revealed that poverty stories can indeed provoke considerable interest among public audiences), the report stresses the crucial importance of engaging media owners, managers and editors in discussions of how to strengthen the level and quality of coverage of issues related to poverty reduction.

How editors view the opportunities and constraints for meeting this challenge, and what will resonate with public audiences, is a vital starting point. Further information on their views, and those of public audiences, would help all policy actors – and working journalists themselves – to pitch possible stories more effectively in an often difficult media context.

### Pitching poverty reduction stories

One significant impression is that promotion of poverty as a traditional social welfare issue is unlikely to boost the level, range and impact of national coverage. But while the prevalence of poverty may challenge its

newsworthiness, the report stresses that feature stories can have a very important place when new angles are found and hard-hitting human stories told.

Similar questions are raised over the value of promoting public interest stories on poverty reduction as a specialist topic. Particular aspects of the policy process intimately linked to poverty reduction – such as national budgets, a key item on journalists' agendas – could be promoted with the media. But, rather than focusing on the institutional mechanics of PRSPs or national development plans, those keen to interest the media may find it more productive to focus on key aspects of wider policy-making *relevant* to strategies on poverty reduction, drawing out the links, inconsistencies or gaps.

The media and public audiences thrive on controversy, so the pros and cons of contentious decisions such as state reform or privatisation may prove more interesting, particularly when local and national political angles and their real-life relevance to the public can be brought out. Whatever the story, those wishing to engage the media need to be aware that a key consideration for the media will always be its topicality, newsworthiness and audience impact.

### **Skills, knowledge and mainstreaming in core 'beats'**

One approach to engage the interest of media is to look for ways in which possible poverty reduction stories can be integrated into the core 'beats' of journalists such as politics, business and economics, governance, corruption, crime and so on. Some editors consulted stated that, notwithstanding their concern, poverty reduction is unlikely to become a distinct area of specialisation, given the nature and demands of the mass media.

This suggests that just as space would be welcome for journalists to develop knowledge of poverty reduction issues and how they relate to core topics, the actual journalistic skills required – such as critical analysis and research skills – may not be much different from those needed to cover any subject. Covering poverty reduction may be a reflection of the wider challenge of strengthening public interest reporting. These are issues to be considered by those outside and within the media industry concerned with supporting stronger journalist training.

### **Amplifying poor people's voices**

The report stresses the need to recognise and support the vitally important role that alternative media such as community radio can play, and that other forms of inclusive communication (such as oral testimonies and community theatre) can be successfully combined with the involvement of the mass media to amplify poor people's voices and scale up their impact.

### **Time for strategic support**

The report urges all actors to strengthen their support for the media, recognising both the value of the mainstream media's public service and public interest roles and the contribution of alternative media, as part of an integral approach to the whole sector. For all the benefits of specific initiatives to tackle problems and seize opportunities, it concludes that a structural approach is called for, including support for comprehensive public policies on the media.





## Introduction

Reading the news in Lagos, Nigeria, on election day. Key considerations for the media on deciding what news to report will always be its topicality, impact and newsworthiness.

GIACOMO PIROZZI | PANOS PICTURES

This report advocates the need for policy actors – such as CSOs, governments and state institutions, foreign donors, international institutions, and policy research bodies – to recognise the potential of the mass media to raise the level and quality of public debate on poverty reduction in low-income countries.

There has been considerable policy research on whether the PRSP approach of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) has effectively involved the public (and the poor in particular) in governments' policy-making on poverty reduction. However, this literature has tended to neglect the role of the media. This is surprising, as the media, while safeguarding their critical independence, could indirectly help support the wider communication strategies needed to boost public engagement in poverty reduction strategies.

### Time to recognise the role of the media

There is a danger that 'other' concerns – such as climate change, conflict, terrorism and crime – could weaken the focus of national and international policymakers on poverty reduction. Policy approaches to poverty reduction are also changing, in the light of the MDGs, second- or third-generation PRSPs, governments' national development plans (NDPs) and visions, and the recent policy emphasis on 'pro-poor' economic growth and 'good governance'.

But such developments only reinforce the importance of the media in covering the crucial issues at stake in poverty reduction strategies. For example, policymakers' and civil society's interests in good governance have less value if they do not pay more attention to the media as a spotlight on the forces shaping relations between 'governors' and the 'governed'.

- The first section of the report – ‘Setting the scene, making the case’ – explores whether, why and how the media could strengthen coverage of poverty reduction issues.
- The second section – ‘Setting out the challenges’ – analyses the barriers and constraints that limit the extent to which the media can meet this challenge.
- The third section – ‘From poverty challenges to media solutions’ – highlights the opportunities to encourage and support stronger media coverage.
- In conclusion, the report stresses the crucial need for relevant actors to recognise the media’s own support requirements. This includes the importance of public policies.

### Report background

The report is the culmination of *Raising Debate*, a three-year pilot project on the media and poverty reduction in six countries,<sup>4</sup> coordinated by Panos London with members of the international Panos network<sup>5</sup> and partners in Africa and South Asia. As well as snapshot studies of the media, communication and poverty reduction, the initiative included national roundtable meetings at which representatives from the media, donors, governments, CSOs and policy research bodies discussed the challenge of extending public debate on poverty reduction. Panos provided briefings and other support materials to the media, training workshops, grant and fellowship programmes to support journalists’ story research and production of media outputs. Work with the media was accompanied by the launch of oral testimony initiatives in several countries to provide a channel for people from marginalised communities to communicate their views, and journalists’ coverage of the issues provided a wider platform to amplify their voices.

The authors gathered additional material for the report during implementation of the project activities, including interviews with a random selection of editors, journalists, civil society actors, policy specialists and official representatives between 2005 and 2007.

### The value and limits of the report findings

Given the small number of focus countries involved, this report does not claim to provide a fully-fledged analysis of the challenge of stronger media engagement in poverty reduction in all low-income countries. Nor does it purport to offer a fully researched case for the role the media could play – especially in the light of the challenges raised by this report. That is a task for a much fuller process of inquiry.

The media are heterogeneous and much of the sector is unlikely, or cannot reasonably be expected, to play the roles on poverty reduction explored here. The report focuses on the mainstream mass media traditionally concerned with public affairs coverage and the public service and public interest roles of journalism. We concentrate mainly on the print media, given its influence on policymakers and our experience in this area, but also cover radio and television to a lesser extent. All references to ‘the media’, unless otherwise stated, apply to the traditional mainstream mass media.

Although the sample insights gathered for this report from the mainstream media cannot claim to be automatically representative of the wider views of relevant media professionals, their aim is to provide an important foundation for continued discussion of the mass media’s potential as a catalyst of debate on key public policy issues such as poverty reduction. To this end, the report also includes case studies providing outside views of the media’s role and coverage.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique and Zambia. Similar work had previously taken place in Uganda

<sup>5</sup> The Panos members involved were Panos South Asia, Panos Eastern Africa, Panos West Africa and Panos Southern Africa

<sup>6</sup> These contributions were written in an individual capacity, following an invitation by Panos. They do not necessarily represent Panos London’s views

For all the above qualifications, Panos London believes that the insights covered by the report are of considerable value. Indeed, despite the mainly qualitative and anecdotal information gathered during the *Raising Debate* project, it is noteworthy that common themes and issues consistently emerged, albeit with nuances, across all the focus countries.

We acknowledge that other forms of communication are crucial to providing effective channels for poor people. But while their importance is highlighted (see Appendix 1), the report's focus is on the media and it has not sought to tackle this subject as well.

### International dimensions

A final observation is that some of the challenges analysed could also be relevant to the media in rich industrial countries, despite their stronger level of resources. Although the topic is not explored here, it certainly deserves acknowledgement, given frequent allegations that, despite increased public awareness of the so-called 'globalisation' phenomenon, media coverage can often be parochial or decontextualised, neglect current and international affairs, or lack critical rigour.<sup>7</sup> Sustaining and strengthening public affairs coverage also seems to be a challenge in the North, with its rapidly changing media industry, shifting political, social and economic circumstances, and changing public attitudes and tastes.

A crucial challenge for the media in both low-income and rich countries is to make the different perspectives of the relevance and effectiveness of international and national policies affecting poverty reduction a stronger part of coverage for their respective public audiences. This challenge is a vital one, given, for example, the complexities of the good governance debate, the need for stronger public understanding of the multiple accountabilities and interests of foreign aid and the increasingly international nature of economic activity.<sup>8</sup>

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See for example Glasgow Media Group (2000) *Viewing the World: News Content and Audience* [www2.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/viewworldsum.pdf](http://www2.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/viewworldsum.pdf); Jenny Stone (2000) *Losing Perspective: Global Affairs on British Terrestrial Television 1989 - 1999*, Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project; P Wilby (23 July 2007) *My suspicions about official sources*, in the *Guardian* <http://media.guardian.co.uk/mediaguardian/story/0,,2132281,00.html>

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Public perceptions of the impact and accountability of international aid have in the UK, for example, been an issue of growing comment and debate among development NGOs, the media, policy research bodies and the government. This has often followed periodic media reports and opinion columns debating corruption scandals affecting African countries, for example, and whether aid should be withheld or increased in this context. For one concise think-piece on the issues at stake from the perspective of one international development NGO, published on the *Guardian* newspaper's website, see P Watt (27 February 2007) *Making Aid Work: international aid has its faults but that is no reason to shy away from honest debate* [http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/patrick\\_watt/2007/02/a\\_call\\_to\\_alms.htm](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/patrick_watt/2007/02/a_call_to_alms.htm)





Although poverty is an everyday issue, it is the real stories that people have to tell that can make it newsworthy. The challenge is for journalists to find these stories and link them to the wider policy debate on poverty reduction.

MIKKEL OSTERGAARD | PANOS PICTURES



# Setting the scene, making the case

There has been growing attention in recent years to the potential of communication to help boost the effectiveness of policies and strategies to combat poverty in low-income developing countries where the daily realities of deprivation and social exclusion are experienced acutely.<sup>9</sup>

One neglected aspect of this emerging discussion, however, has been the independent role that the mass media could play in such countries. By informing the public and highlighting the vital issues and policy decisions at stake, it could help nurture the buoyant climate of public concern and debate that customarily spurs into action those with the power to make a difference in society.

The information made available to Panos in producing this report would suggest that, on the whole, the potential of the media to act as such a catalyst has so far not been realised. In this section we aim to focus the attention of policy actors on the opportunities to engage the media in poverty reduction.

## Policy actors, media roles and media boundaries

At the outset, it is important for policy actors to understand that it is far from accepted or given within the mainstream media that there is a solid professional argument for journalists to contribute to a social challenge such as poverty reduction. Indeed, from the standpoint of professional ethics, many media leaders and professionals would say that they have no mandate or obligation to change the way in which society is run, and in whose interests it is run. For them, the media's duty is to report the news for their core audiences, to explain and explore the issues, provoke discussion and facilitate an exchange of opinions. If the media were to take a given issue, cause or social, political and economic viewpoint as their main reference point, their independence would be in serious danger of being compromised. They see the role of journalists as keeping a detached distance from such influences, lest they compromise reporting objectivity and the individual pursuit of 'truth'.

**'If you see the development process as people's lives changing through direct action then no, the media is not an agent of change. But as part of the overall process of governance related to democracy and rule of law, and the violation of fundamental human rights, then the media has a role... [It's] about how the country needs to be governed, about reforming institutions.'**

**Talat Hussain**, director of news and current affairs,  
Aaj TV, Pakistan, April 2007

While some alternative media, such as community radio, have a more direct mandate to address development issues such as poverty reduction (see p24), the mainstream media have a much wider and more complex range of institutional and societal accountabilities. Considering the heterogeneity and wide-ranging functions of the traditional mass media in response to the multiple needs of its different audiences, it is unlikely that this sector as a whole would be concerned with the challenges of poverty reduction.

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See, for example, M Mozammel and S Odugbemi (2005) *With the Support of Multitudes: Using Strategic Communication to Fight Poverty through PRSPs*, Washington/London: World Bank/Department for International Development

However, one of the media's traditional key roles is to provide intelligent news reporting and stimulating coverage of public affairs – for example, through in-depth features and comment and analysis pieces. This report sets out to highlight this key role and its potential importance for policy actors involved in poverty reduction.

It is also important to point out that not everyone within the media holds the traditional views outlined above. Some media professionals and observers see effective media coverage of public affairs as an essential part of creating an informed, inclusive public debate that ensures genuine citizenship, democratic participation, responsive governance and effective statecraft. In this view, vibrant media coverage is intimately linked with society's development, which could include the need to tackle poverty.

This view holds that the media should not just 'report the news', but extend the public agenda and even help set it. Many media organisations and professionals see the shaping of discourse as a legitimate corollary of their position as one of the major interfaces between the state and society. They would argue too that this widening of the agenda does not have to be at odds with the principles of objectivity and balance, and that individual media houses and journalists are entitled as a matter of freedom of expression to put forward views of a given social or political persuasion.

### Poverty reduction and nurturing journalism as a public good

The key point for policy actors is that, regardless of any wider intent on the part of the media or individual journalists, the sector in effect shapes and reflects public attitudes and climates of political opinion. This in itself makes it a force to be considered and recognised. Within public affairs coverage, for example, there are countless examples of how the force of effective journalism – from ground-breaking news articles to hard-hitting human stories and campaigning reporting – can affect decision-making in both public and private spheres.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, policy actors should recognise – and support – effective journalism as a public good in its own right. Indeed, when it comes to an increasingly important public policy matter such as poverty reduction, the media can play vitally important roles in shaping information provision to the public and contributing to the quality of public discourse. These include:

- **scrutiny:** examining the effectiveness of different actors' approaches to tackling policy challenges and holding influential parties to account for their actions
- providing an **open forum** for coverage and reflection of issues relevant to public audiences, and, in the interests of balance, to help to bring those with less power and influence into public exchanges and debate.

In the case of poverty reduction, the latter would include covering poor people's views of the problems and challenges they face and of the solutions they feel are needed to reduce poverty.

**'The media has tended to give the microphone to the politicians, the company chief executives and to the NGOs. But it has not done enough to take the microphone to the slum areas so the people can tell us how they are coping with poverty.'**

**George Gitau**, acting editor-in-chief of the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, November 2006

<sup>10</sup>

This is not to dismiss the potential of dramas and entertainment, which have been powerful vehicles for discussion of pressing public concerns and sensitive social issues. In Appendix 1, we describe how Panos has used drama and oral testimonies from marginalised people not only as inclusive communication vehicles but also as a focus of mainstream media coverage

But how could the media play such roles? To what extent do they do so currently? Could their role be stronger and more effective? What obstacles and opportunities do the media face? How could relevant policy actors better engage and support the media? These are among the questions we consider in this report. Stronger engagement of the media could lead to greater public awareness of poverty reduction issues, while also providing relevant parts of the media with opportunities for interesting stories.

First, however, we explore whether, how and why the media in low-income countries could strengthen their coverage of poverty reduction. We sketch out, in the context of the growing discussion of the role of communication in official poverty reduction strategies and the heated debates about the World Bank's PRSP approach, the distinct contribution that the media could make, elaborating more fully the value of the roles described above.

**'For me as an editor, there is a compelling case for engaging with poverty. Increasing education and literacy is related to increasing the size of my readership. Our main audiences are indeed drawn from the middle classes, business and policymakers. But these groups cannot live in isolation. The welfare of the many is in the interests of the people who read the Daily Star.'**

**Mahfuz Anan**, editor and publisher of the *Daily Star*, Bangladesh, April 2007

### From worthy cause to making news

Reducing poverty has become a more attractive subject for media coverage, seen less as a worthy cause and more a newsworthy topic in itself. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War the issue has climbed high up the international political agenda, as marked by the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) within the United Nations in September 2000 when the world's government leaders made a pledge to their citizens for the reduction of extreme poverty.<sup>11</sup> Poverty has also become of significant concern for publics worldwide comprising possible media audiences. A 2005 international opinion poll in 68 countries, for example, revealed that poverty is the most pressing humanitarian issue of our time: one quarter of respondents were concerned about it, compared with one in ten who were concerned about terrorism, conflict and wars.<sup>12</sup>

Such developments have followed growing demands from people around the world for policy changes on poverty reduction. Public mobilisations in poor and rich countries – for example, at the G8 summits or international meetings of the IMF and World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) – have brought together unprecedented numbers of CSOs, social movements and ordinary people to pressure governments, official donors and international institutions to take effective action to address poverty.

As a result, poverty has been steadily transformed over the last decade from an invisibly prevalent part of everyday life or a focus of charitable concern into a national and international political challenge that citizens around the world feel they and their politicians should address.

### Bad news is good news?

What of media interest in events in the poorer developing countries themselves? Good news on poverty does sometimes make the headlines – beneficial measures such as moves to cancel debt and abolish public service user fees, or moving human interest stories of survival or success against the odds. But the media thrive on controversy. Indeed, the growing debates about the causes of poverty and solutions for overcoming it are

11. The UN Millennium Declaration lays out the eight MDGs (see UN, 2006, *The Millennium Development Goals Report*). As well as allowing for formal monitoring of specific targets for progress in economic and social development, the MDGs represent an apparent consensus in the development community on how to tackle poverty. For a review of some of the debates, see Panos London (2005) *What are the MDGs and why are they important?* [www.panos.org.uk/extra/mdgs\\_index.asp](http://www.panos.org.uk/extra/mdgs_index.asp)

12. Gallup International (2005) *Voice of the People 2005 Survey Results, Hunger and Poverty*

certainly providing a fair share of their own controversy: disputed policy decisions, corruption scandals, the squandering and misuse of international aid, the policy conditions applied to foreign loans. Myriad charges are made about the failure, malpractice or double standards of international institutions, governments, businesses and NGOs.

While the international spotlight on poverty reduction provides a potentially rich source of stories for journalists in low-income countries, the manifestation of such issues in everyday national life – and their crucial bearing on poor people in particular – is often under-reported or not covered in proper depth. Policy actors therefore need to take advantage of topical national and international events to help the media unearth such stories on a daily basis in ways that are topical and newsworthy.

This may mean a shift in their approach to engaging the media. Poverty has often been presented and covered as a more narrowly defined social issue, and this can certainly interest some audiences, especially through feature stories. But now, in the light of the shifts outlined above, there is also scope for media interest in stories that deal with the issue in its wider political context. These could also be comment and analysis pieces, or ground-breaking news reports or investigative features.

Indeed, many media professionals from lower-income countries interviewed for this report told Panos that ‘politics sells newspapers’. The question that arises is whether and how policy decisions and their impact on poverty reduction can be made a stronger part of political coverage and other core topics for the media. Traditional reporting of politics, for example, appears largely not to have considered poverty reduction as a theme, though the frequent emphasis of personality-based party political reporting may be an obstacle to doing so.

But even if the opportunity exists for building in a focus on poverty reduction in media coverage, the important thing for policy actors to remember is that any such stories need to stand on their journalistic merit and be based on core journalistic principles, including their accessibility and resonance with audiences.

**‘There is often a tendency towards technical coverage – statistics and so on – when it is important to give stories a popular slant and a human face. It’s also vital to find a national angle or a political angle and link issues to the local situation and how they relate to readers.’**

**Mostafa Kamal Majumder**, editor of the *New Nation*, Bangladesh,  
April 2007

### Poverty reduction strategies and opportunities for media involvement

In recent years the MDGs have emerged as a key framework for national and international action to combat extreme poverty. But at a national level, the main instrument for dealing with poverty in low-income countries has been the PRSP approach introduced in 1999 by the World Bank and the IMF (see box, p15).



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See, for example, IMF (2005) *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers*

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Perception of 'Washington sign-off' as undermining country ownership also featured as a concern in the main findings of case studies conducted in the World Bank and IMF's own evaluation of PRSPs. See World Bank (OED) and IMF (IEO) (2005) *The Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative: Findings from 10 country case studies of World Bank and IMF support*, p5. On conditionality, civil society organisations claim their objections are not to the need for countries to meet their fiduciary obligations to spend aid properly on the intended purposes agreed with their peoples but to donors' alleged use of loan conditions to press governments into specific policy choices without public knowledge and discussion and proper democratic debate. See, for example, ActionAid International (2006), *What progress? A shadow review of World Bank conditionality*

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For evaluations held within the Bretton Woods institutions, see World Bank, Operations Evaluation Department (2004) *The Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative: An Independent Evaluation of the World Bank's Support through 2003*; IMF, Independent Evaluation Office (2004) *Report on the Evaluation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF)*; World Bank/IMF (2005) *2005 Review of the PRS Approach: Balancing Accountabilities and Scaling up Results*; World Bank (2002) *Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: A Retrospective Study*. For a range of civil society views, see C de Barra (2004) *PRSP as Theatre – Backstage Policy-Making and the Future of the PRSP Approach*, CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis; Oxfam (2005) *From 'Donorship' to Ownership: Moving Towards PRSP Round Two*; ActionAid International (2004) *Rethinking Participation: Questions for Civil Society about the Limits of Participation in PRSPs*, Washington DC. A sample of contrasting academic perspectives can be found in D Booth (2005) *Missing Links in the Politics of Development: Learning from the PRSP Experiment*, ODI Working Paper 256; J Gould (ed) (2005) *The New Conditionality: The Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies*, Zed Books, London. Panos London (2005) has covered the issues and debates in a briefing for the media, *Who's richer, who's poorer? A journalist's guide to the politics of poverty reduction strategies*

## PRSPs: Core principles, fierce debates

PRSPs are poverty reduction plans prepared by governments in low-income countries, developed in principle through a participatory process that should involve domestic 'stakeholders' (including poor people), as well as external development 'partners' such as bilateral donors, the World Bank and the IMF.

A PRSP identifies the overall policies and programmes a government intends to implement to achieve economic growth and reduce poverty, as well as external financing needs and associated sources of funds. PRSPs are a condition for low-cost loans from donors and multilateral lenders, such as the World Bank, and for debt relief. According to the World Bank and IMF,<sup>13</sup> five core principles underlie the PRSP approach. Strategies should be:

- **country-driven**, promoting national ownership through broad-based civil society participation
- **result-oriented** and focused on outcomes that will benefit the poor
- **comprehensive** in recognising the multidimensional nature of poverty
- **partnership-oriented**, involving coordinated participation of all partners and stakeholders
- based on a **long-term perspective** for poverty reduction.

Views have often been fiercely divided on the alleged success or failure of PRSPs, as well as the extent to which they have fundamentally differed from the previous IMF and World Bank-supported structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) much-criticised for their alleged social damage and disappointing economic performance. Yet the introduction of the PRSP principles of 'national ownership' and 'stakeholder participation' did mark a significant innovation.

After charges that SAPs had been externally imposed and crucially lacked proper local support to be implemented effectively, the principle of 'national ownership' suggested that governments and peoples might now have the political and social space to determine their own home-grown solutions for tackling poverty, with international donors aligning their financial support behind national plans backed by both governments and the public. The principle of 'stakeholder participation', meanwhile, held the promise that poor people themselves would gain the chance to identify poverty problems and solutions, with their inclusion improving the content of policies and the quality of the policymaking process itself.

In practice, such principles have been the subject of disputed interpretation. Civil society critics, for example, claim that the need for the international financial institutions (IFIs) to approve PRSPs – as well as the policy conditions they say IFIs continue to apply to their loans (for example, over macro-economic policies) – contradict 'national ownership'.<sup>14</sup>

There has similarly been a long debate about 'participation', with recognition, including in World Bank and IMF evaluations, that public involvement and the inclusion of the poor have often been limited by governments' lack of human and financial resources and practical expertise, or by their sensitivities about the ramifications of broader and deeper participation.<sup>15</sup>

“The need for better governance ... is not without its controversies and different perspectives. It is a subject that civil society organisations and other non-state actors could use to interest the media.”

PRSPs, as introduced since and now being adapted, provide an important reference point for encouraging media coverage of poverty reduction as a public interest matter, not least because key topics of media concern such as politics, business and economics, governance and even crime are relevant to them. The media could themselves seize these opportunities, but policy actors could consider too how the policy themes and debates surrounding PRSPs could be turned into a rich seam of stories of potential interest to editors and journalists in low-income countries.

First, the *content* of policy reforms introduced as part of or alongside poverty reduction strategies can be a good source of ideas to attract the media. Deciding an economic strategy, for example, is a highly political process because it involves making difficult decisions, with politicians, different ministries, business leaders, small entrepreneurs, social movements and CSOs debating and disputing what the gains and losses for a country will be. Given official policymakers' invocation of the need for 'pro-poor growth', efforts could be made to encourage the media to examine the implications of such policies for different social groups and poor people in particular, and whether policy choices are consistent with the stated aim of poverty reduction.

In the social sphere, a policy focus on providing universal primary education may bring benefits for younger children, but it may mean a government has to cut back support to secondary and higher education, possibly impairing the prospects for longer-term development aspirations. Banking reforms may be needed, but will they ensure that credit is available to smaller entrepreneurs, and how do they relate to the provision of microfinance to poor people?

The policy process too could yield opportunities for interesting the media, not least because, with the rise of PRSPs, poverty reduction is supposed to be a key consideration in official decision-making systems traditionally of core journalistic interest such as annual budgeting and public finance. Monitoring budget design and implementation has become an increasingly important activity for policy actors concerned with poverty reduction, and this experience could be used to inform and engage the media. Examination of the policy process also affords the opportunity to engage the interest of journalists in transparency and accountability matters – who is involved or neglected in shaping policies, whose interests do policies reflect, and are systems of governance effective and fair from the point of view of the stated aim of poverty reduction?

Again, links with traditional journalistic interests, such as parliamentary reporting, could be exploited. For example, parliamentarians have a key role in ensuring governance that both strengthens democracy and helps to support poverty reduction. Yet parliaments can often be weak and ineffective, and one of the criticisms of governments' PRSPs and international donor support for them is that they are said to have circumvented established political systems.<sup>16</sup> The combination of parliamentary and media oversight is usually seen as crucial to any society's effective democratic functioning.

Vital issues of national sovereignty and democratic accountability can indeed be at stake. Good governance reforms, for example, now figure in many PRSPs and are a key consideration in international donor loans and aid. While the need for better governance is often stressed by the public and development actors in low-income countries, the issue, including the approach of governments and international donors, is not without its controversies and different perspectives. It is a subject that CSOs and other non-state actors could use to interest the media.<sup>17</sup>

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Instead of boosting the potentially key accountability role of legislators as the link between policymakers and the people, the charge goes, PRSP consultations have revolved instead around donors' discussions with the executive and leading ministries such as finance and planning, as well as the well-connected and better resourced NGOs. On parliaments, see for example ODI et al (2007) *Parliaments and Development: What shapes parliamentary performance and what can donors do to enhance it?* Briefing Paper 16; Parliamentary Network on the World Bank ([www.pnowb.org](http://www.pnowb.org)), the Parliamentary Centre and Poverty Reduction ([www.parlcent.ca/povertyreduction/index\\_e.php](http://www.parlcent.ca/povertyreduction/index_e.php)). Christian Aid et al (2005) *Kept in the dark – A briefing on parliamentary scrutiny of the IMF and World Bank*; Xan Rice (28 July 2007) 'Outrage as Kenya's MPs seek £45,000 payoffs', the *Guardian* [www.guardian.co.uk/kenya/story/0,,2136605,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/kenya/story/0,,2136605,00.html)

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In the case of PRSPs, the very fact that donors have made them a requirement for low-income countries to qualify for aid and financial support has been a sensitive matter for some governments. Their concern is that 'process' conditionality is being added to the policy conditions donors attach to their loans, opening the door for donors allegedly to interfere in political processes as well as policy choices. In Bangladesh, for example, a media stir was created in 2006 when a former minister publicly criticised donor conditions and dismissed claims that the country's PRSP enjoyed 'national ownership'. See Moslem Uddin Ahmed (18 October 2006) *Mayeen Khan: a rebel with a cause* Panos London/Panos Features, and Praful Patel (18 October 2006) *World Bank's vice-president for South Asia replies to PRSP critics*, Panos London/Panos Features, at [www.panos.org.uk](http://www.panos.org.uk)

## Participation, communication and the media

Given the importance of ‘participation’ in PRSPs, there has been growing debate about the crucial role that communication can play in boosting public involvement in them, particularly the involvement of poor people. It is therefore important for those wishing to strengthen the role of the traditional mass media in covering poverty reduction issues to understand the challenge in this wider communication context.

For example, the World Bank has stressed the importance of communication in ensuring effective participation in PRSPs – including the potential of the media to increase the public awareness needed for stakeholder involvement. In a 2005 report published with the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), for example, it argues that: ‘The effective engagement of stakeholders to build ownership through the country-driven approach of the PRSP is heavily dependent on the availability of and access to information.’<sup>18</sup> Providing a range of country case studies on efforts to improve information-sharing and debate, the authors advocate the need for ‘strategic communication’ to facilitate effective stakeholder input and manage public expectations as part of the effective design and implementation of PRSPs.<sup>19</sup>

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As note 9

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As above. For the authors, strategic communication does not simply involve a one-way flow of information to the public, but demands the communication of citizens’ views back to the government to help shape policy formulation and inform decision-making, as well as widespread debate to help build common understanding and consensus about the poverty reduction agenda. Moreover, effective communication, they add, is not just necessary during the development phase of a PRSP, when it facilitates dialogue and participation, but also during the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages, when it facilitates accountability and informs future policy dialogues. While the focus of this World Bank/DFID report is often on the value of communications to allow governments to manage public expectations, it also indicates there is a role for communication in nurturing and expressing public demand for the effectiveness and accountability of PRSPs, presumably in cases where ruling elites are reluctant to commit to a focus on poverty

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As note 9, p18

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A frequent criticism from CSOs involved was that consultations were often superficial, with their views sought at the end of the PRSP drafting process and often not taken on board. This resulted in a mainly one-way process (from the government to CSOs) rather than two-way dialogues. Another observation was that consultation with civil society was typically limited to those specific aspects of the PRSP on which it was considered competent – such as health, education and other social issues – and not the more contentious and technically complex issues of macroeconomic policy, for example. For a range of non-governmental views on the challenges and limits of civil society participation, see the references in note 5

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The World Bank/DFID’s *With the Support of Multitudes* report provides numerous case studies with examples

**‘Free, independent and plural mass media systems are a condition for genuinely participatory PRS processes. The mass media are the chief mediators of political reality, the main sources of political and economic intelligence, and significant influencers of public opinion.’**

World Bank<sup>20</sup>

The first round of PRSPs saw relatively limited levels of stakeholder involvement in many countries, and public communication efforts – often prompted, led or supported by CSOs – were aimed at overcoming frequent deficiencies in official consultations. Government-led processes were often time-constrained (revolving round the need for PRSPs to secure immediate debt relief and donor finance), held largely in regional and capital cities, and poorly organised. Given the frequent absence or weakness of coordinated communication strategies, knowledge of, and participation in, the PRSP process, beyond leading national policymaker and foreign donor circles, was frequently limited to well-organised and well-connected NGOs and CSOs, excluding or leaving pending the challenge of involving wider civil society at the grassroots.<sup>21</sup> In many cases participation turned out to be little more than top-down consultation or information-giving.

Over time, however, the PRSP experiment has in numerous countries gradually opened up important spaces for more poverty-focused policy dialogue and there has been a stronger place for communication strategies and initiatives.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly the case where governments and stakeholders have learnt from previous lessons and developed stronger systems to secure public input in the development of their second or third poverty reduction strategies. Many of these mechanisms, often the result of discussions with donors or pressure from civil society, could provide entrypoints for engagement of the media on poverty reduction. They include:

- improving dissemination of information about the PRSP and the PRSP process
- extending policy debates beyond established interlocutors to include a wider range of NGOs and CSOs and working with them to gather the views of poor people

“...the opening of spaces for policy dialogue has created a potentially stronger environment for critically independent media reporting on the policy issues and options at stake.”

- establishing technical working groups to facilitate discussion and coordination between different parts of government, donors and civil society, involving the media in some cases
- holding more regular policy consultation forums at local and national levels
- establishing mechanisms to gather information and conduct research on poverty on a more systematic basis, with research bodies, NGOs, CSOs and community organisations often involved in tracking poverty and the impact of policies
- developing and implementing communication strategies with civil society and donor support.

As governments have a prime responsibility for effective communication with the public, and as official information often constitutes an important source for journalists, progress in developing the communication strategies needed to strengthen systems for public participation could bring benefits for both the public and the media alike. But it is also important to bear in mind that for critically independent forces such as the media, this much-needed opportunity is also not without its difficulties and controversies.

In many countries, civil society critics, for example – spanning both those treating PRSPs as an opportunity to widen the political and social space for policy debate and those more inclined to dismiss PRSPs as ‘public relations strategies’ and thus as an ideological sham – have argued that radical reform or outright change of existing policies relevant to poverty reduction are required.<sup>23</sup> In Pakistan, for example, a lack of confidence in both the official policy process and its likely policy outcomes led CSOs formally to reject participation in official plans to develop the country’s PRSP. Notwithstanding the interest among donors and given parts of the government and state in boosting participation through research and public communication on poverty reduction, numerous observers questioned the extent to which top-level political backing was available to support such efforts as a strategic priority.<sup>24</sup>

Given their often different approaches to participation and policy reform, the communication efforts of various policy actors can be a highly political matter. But whatever the alleged advantages or shortcomings of PRSPs as a policy vehicle for poverty reduction, the opening of spaces for policy dialogue has created a potentially stronger environment for critically independent media reporting on the policy issues and options at stake.

### Changing policy approaches

It is also important for both media and non-media actors to note that important shifts are now taking place in international and national policy approaches to poverty reduction. These have numerous implications for both possible media content and for the participation and communication context in which the media operates and might be engaged.

Alongside the increased emphasis of policymakers on ‘good governance’, an important development is the stress on economic growth and longer-term development, as frequently witnessed by the stronger weight given to the productive economy in second- or third-generation PRSPs (now often bearing their own local titles). Numerous governments, often with the MDGs as a general reference point, have been returning to their own five-year national development plans (rather than the three-year span of original PRSPs). They have also even been developing much longer-term development strategies (to which PRSPs/NDPs might be linked).<sup>25</sup>

While policymakers internationally have invoked the need for ‘pro-poor growth’, the shifts outlined above would appear to reflect the perception of low-income country governments that a short-term focus on poverty alone is too narrow, particularly where poverty reduction efforts focus largely on

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For such critics, the aims of creating a critical mass of public opinion might be twofold. On the one hand, the weight of public opinion might encourage/pressure governments to commit to substantive progress in poverty reduction. On the other, it might be to encourage/pressure governments to resist where necessary the policy conditions of the international donors (eg, often controversial measures such as privatisation or trade liberalisation) that they say damage poor people, benefit powerful elite interests instead and are at odds with tackling the structural causes of poverty. They argue for a shift from the alleged tendency of governments to demonstrate greater accountability to donors to a situation instead in which governments and donors are both made more accountable for benefiting poor people as a policy priority. Official advocates of recent reforms would counter that growth and poverty reduction are now being successfully combined in numerous countries, and that generating and sustaining public support for continued progress is a legitimate and necessary part of achieving increasingly inclusive policy approaches

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Such concerns were voiced at Panos South Asia’s national roundtable on the media and poverty reduction held in Islamabad on 21 July 2005. They were also voiced in several author interviews with representatives from the media, state, civil society, policy research and donor communities at that time

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Zambia, for example, has now returned to a five-year national development plan, while Kenya has launched plans to develop a Vision 2030 emphasising business-led economic growth. Mozambique, for its part, has its Vision 2025 plan



“While other actors can provide relevant information for the public, the media have the capacity to reach people en masse – a crucial function if the public is to receive vital news and analysis...”

provision of basic services.<sup>26</sup> They are now paying greater attention to issues such as private sector development, trade and investment, agriculture, mining and tourism, and the development of infrastructure such as roads and electricity generation.

While these changes bring opportunities and risks for the future of strategies for poverty reduction that need to be taken into account,<sup>27</sup> they may also offer a wider range of poverty reduction-relevant topics on which policy actors can attempt to engage media interest, beyond PRSPs’ traditional focus on social sectors.

### The value of the media and its different roles

Policy reforms often stem from important shifts in public and political opinion, with the latter usually the result themselves of efforts to raise awareness and debate of an issue. Policy actors could engage the media with such aims in mind, while recognising that journalists have their own distinct role to play as independent commentators. Their coverage, providing different views and opinions and a balanced range of reports, can help foster an atmosphere of healthy public debate. This should be regarded as a public good in its own right, regardless of the right of the different policy actors to promote their own views through the media.

Strong, independent media coverage could help create a more propitious environment for wider efforts to tackle poverty, with the following potential roles:

- communicating with and informing a wide range of audiences on poverty reduction issues
- providing an open forum to reflect and bring in different public views – particularly those that are under-represented in the public sphere
- providing an inclusive platform for public debate
- scrutinising and holding governments, state bodies, politicians, donors, businesses and CSOs to account for their actions on poverty reduction, thus acting as a force to increase the transparency and accountability of decision-making.

### Communicating and informing

While other actors can provide relevant information for the public, the media have the capacity to reach people en masse – a crucial function if the public is to receive vital news and analysis of significant developments in overall strategies and specific programmes and initiatives to combat poverty. They can also add value through independent coverage that explains and explores the issues for the public and highlights the consequences for poor people in particular.

This does not just mean engaging the media to cover the mechanics of the policy process; the media could examine the newsworthy substance of wider policies relevant to poverty reduction – for example, key stories on social spending plans; reforms of the public sector; privatisation; support for small and medium enterprises; and measures to promote urban employment or the agricultural sector. The media can report and comment critically on the policy issues, options and viewpoints at stake.

### Providing an open forum to reflect different public views and voices

The media provide a forum for a two-way flow of information, comment and reaction between the public, CSOs, the government in general and policymakers in particular. This can be particularly useful to gauge the relevance and impact of policy proposals and measures.

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The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), for example, while welcoming PRSPs as an opportunity to move away from structural adjustment, has stressed the need for PRSPs, notwithstanding their stronger social focus, to develop longer-term foundations for sustainable progress in poverty reduction (see [www.unctad.org](http://www.unctad.org))

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On the positive side, in terms of ‘national ownership’, the move by governments to develop their own longer-term plans and strategies may signal their determination to lead the development process after the difficulties and vulnerabilities associated with debt-driven adjustment and aid dependency. At the same time, however, in the drive for economic growth, there is the risk that the focus on poverty and participation said to underlie the principles of the PRSP approach will be diluted or lost, thus endangering the hopes of more equitable development engendered by the PRS experiment and the emergence of the MDGs

By reflecting currents of public opinion to audiences and including the voices of poor people and those working to support them, the media can extend the range of views in the public domain.

### Providing a platform for public debate

The media can either act as a platform for public debate or set the political agenda themselves on key public policy issues, and play an important role in creating greater public debate and awareness.

#### **The *Daily Star*, Bangladesh**

By creating an effective platform for pluralistic public debate and possible policy reform on poverty-related issues, the *Daily Star* has engaged its readership with different policy actors, targeting wider political audiences in the country. Mahfuz Anan, the paper's editor and publisher, explains: 'We've held roundtables to create an environment of debate – transcribing and reporting the proceedings, soliciting readers' letters and publishing editorials. We've teamed up with experts and policy think-tanks to hold roundtables on other topics such as transport, energy, poverty reduction, exports and trade policies, industrialisation strategies and so on. Then, with the results of the debates, we've formulated a set of recommendations for incorporation into the political parties' manifestos. It may be a valid assertion that the media itself is not a development or political actor. But circumstances also dictate the need for engagement with issues and events.'

### Scrutiny: holding actors to account

The media can help hold national and international policymakers to account for their choices, advice and support in relation to poverty reduction and how they are implemented. They can also act as a watchdog to ensure CSOs and the private sector are accountable for the consequences of their own approaches, practices and actions.

For example, in daily terms, the media can monitor abuses of public positions. Although corruption is not confined to official institutions and public officials, diverting public money – often international aid money – from its intended purpose inflicts damaging costs on the public, particularly poor people, undermining prospects for poverty reduction and development.

PRSP consultations have sometimes raised controversial issues that can be the basis for good media stories. For example, Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of the *New Nation*, told us that after a national NGO, the Development Organisation of the Rural Poor, raised the issue of accessibility of health services during a consultation in Bangladesh, his paper ran a story about out-of-date medicines and the sale of medicines for profit. The authorities set up registers of available medicines as a result.

The PRSP process can provide opportunities for media scrutiny. The media's watchdog function is particularly important as policymakers turn proposals and policies into specific decisions and plans. The media can raise questions about whether policies are appropriate and effective, whether they are being implemented as planned, with the intended results and in a responsive and accountable manner. Events on the political calendar – such as official annual reporting on progress in poverty reduction<sup>28</sup> – can also provide an opportunity for media scrutiny. Scrutinising budgets and medium-term expenditure frameworks helps the public know whether finance is available and appropriately allocated in support of PRSP objectives and pursuit of the MDGs.

28 The government of Mozambique, for example, has institutionalised its Observatório da Pobreza (poverty observatory – see [www.op.gov.mz/](http://www.op.gov.mz/)) as a multi-stakeholder event where annual progress reports are discussed

The media can also scrutinise how international donor programmes intend to achieve PRSP objectives. This is important in that it can allow the public to understand what governments are really committing to, especially in cases where aid represents a considerable part of national budgets. Donors are supposed to be committed to ‘aligning’ their lending with a government’s PRSP, but because PRSPs tend to state what a government wants to achieve rather than how it intends to achieve it, donors have a lot of latitude in deciding what they will provide money for. For example, if a PRSP simply commits to providing potable drinking water to more communities, donors could argue for privatisation, regardless of whether or not this was a solution debated during the formulation of the PRSP.<sup>29</sup>

Policy actors such as CSOs must appreciate that scrutiny is a challenging activity for journalists, as it involves having the knowledge, skills and contacts to track the interplay between complex subjects such as food security or access to public services, the arcane workings of public and private institutions, and the vested interests of different political, social and economic groups. And, as highlighted above, national decision-making increasingly has international dimensions, complicating examination of accountability matters. Scrutiny requires journalists to track developments on various policy fronts relevant to poverty reduction, each with its own complex dynamics and political sensitivities, and not just those within PRSP design and implementation.<sup>30</sup>

### Media expectations and media independence

As well as official donors, there are signs that governments and CSOs are showing greater interest in the media, including advocacy NGOs. They all rightly see the media as an important outlet to the public. This is welcome in that it could yield contacts, possible story leads and possible sources of outside practical support for the media. However, this collaboration is not without its difficulties and questions.

### The media and poverty reduction: making the donor mainstream?

Some within the World Bank and the UK’s official international development agency, DFID, have identified the media as a ‘driver of change’ as part of promoting within their institutions the importance of communication for development. In March 2006 they included discussion of the media as a specific part of a global conference of Southern- and Northern-based practitioners on communication and poverty reduction, held under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the leading industrial nations’ policy research body. They invited other donors, such as Swiss Development Cooperation and Scandinavian official development agencies such as SIDA, as well as different civil society and media organisations, to discuss how the international donor community, along with governments and non-state actors, could individually and collectively make communication – including the role of the media – an integral part of national and international support for development efforts on poverty reduction.

Holding the conference at the OECD was significant in that this body helps to develop and mainstream the overall policy approach of its member countries – including monitoring the levels, quality and coherence of the international aid they provide.<sup>31</sup>

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Controversy has surrounded the spending limits and policy conditions attached to World Bank and IMF loans, with allegations that these have often been negotiated behind closed doors with leading ministries, despite the greater space for policy debate under PRSPs

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For example, the promotion of foreign trade and investment, often identified nationally as a priority for poverty reduction, may be affected by rules that governments negotiate separately, for example, in the World Trade Organization or bilaterally with the rich countries

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World Bank et al, *Deepening Voice and Accountability to Fight Poverty: A Dialogue of Communication Implementers* (March 2006) <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTDEVCOMMENG/Resources/CommImplementersDialogueMar06Summary.pdf>

*“To perform their vital public service and public interest roles, the media must be allowed and enabled to keep a critical distance from all actors and positions.”*

Firstly, as far as official policy actors are concerned, the media are distinct actors in their own right and cannot be expected to step into the breach left by weak public communication and oversight systems. Secondly, there is a danger of international donors and NGOs simply taking an ‘instrumentalist’ view of the media, which sees the sector as a ready-made means to pursue ‘development’ ends, without considering the media’s own support needs. As we shall see in the next section, ‘Setting out the challenges’, this is particularly problematic in low-income countries, where parts of the media and many working journalists are highly under-resourced.

Outside collaboration and support should also be provided on the understanding that the media are distinct, independent actors with their own contribution to make as potential catalysts of change. To perform their vital public service and public interest roles, the media must be allowed and enabled to keep a critical distance from all actors and positions. Non-media forces have every right to promote their own policy views and advocacy messages on how development change is best achieved and in whose interests existing policies are shaped, and to compete for media attention and influence. But their alleged failure to respect and recognise the independence<sup>32</sup> of the media has sometimes caused resentment among journalists, who also feel that non-media actors do not always have a proper practical understanding of the media’s professional needs and challenges.

### Media diversity, reach and audience impact

When considering the media’s role in raising awareness and debate on poverty reduction, and how better to support them to do this, all policy actors need to bear in mind that the media, journalists and the public are not homogenous groups. Journalists based in capital cities tend to have different skills, priorities and needs from those based in the regions. Different types of media will reach different audiences, have varying levels of influence in terms of breaking news, and be more or less pro-active in their public service and public interest roles.

### Television

While the visual power of television (TV) means that it can be the most influential in getting messages across, much of its news and public affairs coverage often follows less interactive, traditional formats that do not engage audiences as much as they should. Much broadcasting tends to be entertainment-oriented and does not pay significant attention to poverty-related news stories, although poverty issues can be effectively covered in entertainment programmes such as soap operas. TV also tends to be urban-based as households in poor rural areas often lack electricity or cannot afford television sets. According to one journalist, this bias means that poverty issues are unlikely to be addressed as news items, but may be covered as features or current affairs stories.<sup>33</sup> He says that, for poverty issues to be more widely addressed, they might need to be built around a ‘saleable urban content’ or charismatic personalities who might champion them in ways that would prove compelling for urban audiences.

However, one advantage of television is that it overcomes the illiteracy barrier which prevents many poor people from accessing print media news. Language can be a barrier, though in Pakistan the emergence of regional channels broadcasting in provincial languages is helping to overcome this problem. Television can also be available 24 hours, not once a day like a newspaper.

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Many journalists uphold the need for objective, factually accurate, balanced and fair reporting and strive to apply such principles even if their media organisations may have – and are entitled to – their own views. Independence is not necessarily synonymous with neutrality, even where the media are committed to ‘public service’ (for further discussion of this issue, see *At the heart of change*, pp22-24). But it is important to recognise that non-media actors often lack confidence in the media, not just on account of frequently weak professional practices and standards but also, as will be explored in the next section, the considerable impact of political, commercial and other pressures on coverage

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This is the view of Talat Hussain, director of news and current affairs, Aaj TV, Pakistan





Different types of media will reach different audiences.

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## Newspapers

Newspapers tend to cover more poverty-related issues than TV, and often provide the most in-depth coverage – particularly weekly and Sunday editions. And although the content of print media is not necessarily as up to the minute as television, it is a less transitory source of information as it can be used for at least the whole of a day. Circulation is often higher than thought as a single newspaper is often read by several people.

Low literacy levels nevertheless mean that newspapers tend to have a more limited circulation. In African countries, local or district-level newspapers published in local languages are viewed as unprofitable, so papers are largely read by (capital) city-based people. However, people can often read in their local language, so markets might actually be bigger than thought. Indeed, regional newspapers in South Asia are profitable by comparison and have high circulations. Some countries, nevertheless, have too small a market to make regional papers profitable.

## Radio

Although radio remains a largely metropolitan phenomenon in some countries like Pakistan, most poor, illiterate and rural people listen to radio, and many regional radio stations broadcast in local languages. This is a simple means to reach a broader audience, and can target specific groups. For example, a documentary produced by Breeze FM in Zambia on wages paid to cotton pickers was broadcast in English for medium-scale farmers, employees of cotton sponsoring companies and NGO representatives, and in Chinyanja for small-scale farmers.

Airing programmes in local languages also enables people to respond through phone-ins. In fact, radio phone-in shows are mushrooming in the poorest countries and are an effective way of giving people the opportunity to talk about issues that affect them. These shows, which are often aired at prime times, have been facilitated by the mobile phone revolution. They offer a highly effective channel for ordinary people to debate development issues.

Because radio stations tend to provide news summaries, their coverage of poverty issues may be less in-depth than newspapers, but they reach a wider audience. In fact, radio programmes often draw their news items from the papers, so while the papers tend to break the news, radio spreads it.<sup>34</sup>

## Urban v rural

It may be easier to encourage regionally based journalists and radio stations to report on poverty issues than those based in capital cities, for various reasons:

- local audiences are mostly comprised of farmers and agricultural workers and development is their primary agenda; city-based audiences tend to be more interested in national politics
- ownership of media outlets – for example, in Zambia regional radio stations are mostly owned by the Catholic Church, which is not commercially driven and can therefore give considerable attention to poverty issues and focus more on playing an educative role
- some parts of the local media, such as community radio stations<sup>35</sup> in Ghana (see the box on page 24), may support development as their primary objective
- with fewer income-earning opportunities, the local media in many countries are more willing to broadcast poverty-focused shows developed by CSOs in exchange for payment, though this raises problematic issues discussed later in the report.

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This overall pattern may be changing in certain cases. Warren Nyamugasira of the NGO Forum, Uganda, for example, claims the print media are becoming less important in terms of breaking news in his country

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Community radio, according to the strict definition, is radio that is owned or run by a community (a geographical community or community of interest) and reflects a high degree of participation by that community. However, the term is also sometimes used to cover local radio stations owned or run by local or national government, private owners or religious institutions (as in the case of the Catholic radio stations in Zambia)

People living in rural areas would seem to be potentially better informed and have more opportunity to learn about poverty issues than those in urban areas, particularly capital cities. However, it may be difficult to set local stories in the context of wider national policy issues and debates and the quality of reporting can be weaker as local media tend to be under-resourced:

- local journalists tend to be less well trained than those based in the cities<sup>36</sup>
- they lack equipment such as voice recorders and computers, and have limited access to telephones, email and the Internet
- local radio stations often lack the financial resources to support more in-depth journalism
- they have limited access to poor people because journalists are typically stationed in district capitals rather than deep in rural areas.<sup>37</sup>

Thus while there may be potential to encourage local media to report on poverty issues, CSOs and donors need to provide the relevant training to enable them to provide wider and higher-quality reporting and analysis.

### Audience

The type of audience it caters for will also dictate which public service and public interest functions each media type can perform and the support it might need to achieve this. Radio is most likely to reach the poor, and television young people. Newspapers, meanwhile, will reach the urban elite and intelligentsia. As such, they may have an important accountability role because they are more likely to be read by politicians and public servants.

Those interested in supporting the media as a force for development should therefore consider which parts of the media they want to support and why. For more political impact, building the capacity of newspaper journalists may be a priority, while supporting rural radio stations would be the priority if the aim is to inform and engage the poor.

### Away from the mainstream

It is important to recognise that other forms of media outside of the mainstream also play an important role in providing vital information and engaging audiences on poverty issues.

One challenge facing community radio is the need for a supportive regulatory environment and to develop synergistic relationships to take advantage of economies of scale, share programming and scale up the amplification of community voices. This can be difficult in countries where stations operate in different languages. Highly localised coverage also makes it difficult to explain and accessibly explore the wider national and international issues that affect communities.

### Powering poverty reduction: community radio in Ghana

Outside the mainstream media, other approaches to public communication can play a vital role. **Wilna Quarmyne**, deputy executive director of Ghana's Radio Ada and coordinator of the Ghana Community Radio Network, describes the power of community radio in engaging audiences and finding solutions to poverty, but points out that such achievements need proper support and space in a commercial environment.

<sup>36</sup> According to Mohammed Matovu, Panos Eastern Africa, this is the case in Uganda, leading to poor quality coverage of poverty issues in rural areas

<sup>37</sup> For example, in rural Zambia inaccessible roads can prevent regional journalists from travelling to reach marginalised and poor communities

Eight community radio stations operate in Ghana, serving disadvantaged rural communities. They play a unique role in contributing to poverty reduction by:

- raising awareness of communities' tremendous social and cultural wealth
- heightening their awareness that they have a right not to be poor
- enabling them to share and draw from their collective experiences and competencies
- helping them take cooperative action based on shared priorities and new perspectives.

Acting on knowledge and processes established and supported by community radio stations, communities have taken the initiative to diversify food crops and practice organic farming, plant trees, de-silt water bodies to arrest environmental degradation, and demand provision of public services and infrastructure that have been withheld or delayed – such as roads, health facilities and loans to teachers for village schools. Community radio stations have also helped local governments mobilise communities – for example, to take part in immunisation campaigns, or to improve tax payment and collection.

Communities attest to the role that community radio stations play in enriching language, strengthening culture, promoting dialogue, reducing conflict and building peace – all building blocks for poverty reduction and development. The reason community radio stations are able to play such an effective role in poverty reduction include:

- programme content is driven by communities, based on their experiences and priorities
- field-based production seeks out and gives a voice to the most marginalised
- they use local languages and processes such as oral testimony that enable sharing of indigenous knowledge
- producers are members of the community who are familiar with the challenges of poverty and sensitive to community mores
- not-for-profit operations mean that serving the communities guides their decision-making
- they have formed themselves into an association that allows open sharing of practical challenges and immense human rewards of realising their common vision.

Despite all these advantages, the value of community radio stations in poverty reduction is not being sufficiently harnessed. Although they do not need to be encouraged to focus more on poverty issues – their purpose is to support community development – they are very under-resourced and would benefit from support to develop their capacity and promote their financial sustainability. At best, the eight on-air community radio stations serve 19 of 138 districts in the country. The regulatory authority has been inexplicably slow to allocate frequencies to community radio stations, and is seeking to impose arbitrary restrictions, such as limiting coverage to a 5km transmission area, without reference to a community's socio-cultural and economic ties. In contrast, at least 84 commercial radio stations had at least 131 frequencies – and possibly up to 300 – allocated to them as of January 2007.



## Setting out the challenges

The liberalisation of media in many developing countries has led to an increase in the number of TV channels and radio stations but also commercial pressure to compete for limited audiences. There is not necessarily coverage of a wider range of issues and views: this radio station in Nepal broadcasts 24 hours a day, for example, but the content is almost exclusively music.

MIKKEL OSTERGAARDI | PANOS PICTURES

In the first section we discussed how the media's public service and public interest roles could be an important catalyst of public awareness and debate on poverty reduction. Information and views we gathered for this report suggest that this potential remains largely untapped. In this section we explore some of the possible reasons why.

The World Bank argues that the effectiveness of the media's contribution depends on whether there is a free, independent and plural media system, determined by:

- an appropriate legal and regulatory environment
- the extent to which it can penetrate all sections of the public and political communities
- whether the media can produce informed, insightful and engaging reports and analysis.<sup>38</sup>

Panos research suggests that the media's role has been relatively peripheral in PRSPs and poverty reduction debates,<sup>39</sup> despite possible opportunities afforded by policy actors' different public actions and advocacy. Media coverage of issues relevant to poverty reduction, even when it may have been rising in quantity in some countries, often lacks analytical depth and human focus.<sup>40</sup>

In many of the poorest countries – particularly in Africa – the media is still an infant industry struggling to find its feet. Performing stronger public service and public interest roles is not necessarily a priority for much of the media, and commercial, political and capacity constraints limit both their ability and willingness to play them on poverty reduction, as we shall see.

Jonathan Adabre, economics and business correspondent with Ghana's *Public Agenda*, puts the problem down to the lack of a strong accountability culture, with journalists not used to holding power-holders to account and

<sup>38</sup>  
As note 9, pp 18-19

<sup>39</sup>  
See, for example, in the case of Zambia, Panos Southern Africa (2005) *Study on Levels of Communication and Media Engagement in the PRSP Process*, Lusaka

<sup>40</sup>  
As note 39



not considering it their responsibility to raise debate in the public interest. Meanwhile, there is the question of the extent to which poverty is considered or can be made ‘newsworthy’, and whether policy actors such as CSOs have been effective in advocating the kinds of coverage that might prove more attractive to the media’s own needs and interests.

### Commercial pressures and changing media ‘markets’

After many years of state control, the media in many developing countries are being (or have been) liberalised, laying the basis for stronger media freedoms and bringing new players into the arena. However, while the number of media outlets has increased, the frequent lack of effective public policies means that the changes have not necessarily led to coverage of a wider range of issues and views, nor opened up new spaces for political and public discourse.

The increased competition of ‘freer’ markets has intensified commercial pressures on private media companies and some state-owned companies to fight harder for limited audiences in order to survive or expand. This situation seems to have exerted pressure towards coverage of more conventional topics for better-off audiences, creating problems for journalists who need to find editorial space and receptive audiences for their coverage of poverty reduction issues.

**‘There are many television stations now – but who are they for? Public service television is vital. But we are asked: “If this programme is not going to make money, do we need it?”’**

George Gitau, acting editor-in-chief of the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, December 2006

The need for advertising revenue has also squeezed editorial space – especially for stories dealing with subjects considered less popular that cater for niche audiences. In Ghana and Kenya, for example, a rapid influx of private media companies, particularly in FM radio, has intensified the competition for audiences, motivating them to report only the stories which are most attractive from a business point of view.

Sensationalist or confrontational politics, sport, gossip and glamour all seem to sell. And although many poverty-related stories are political in nature, the media tend to focus on political *personalities* rather than the *issues*, often forfeiting the quality and range of reporting in order to amass audience numbers.

**‘Confrontational politics seems to be the driving force in the Kenyan mass media. And in the rush to maximise profits, media houses have fallen in the trap of hiring half-baked journalists and correspondents, which adversely affects the quality of media content.’**

Mutegi Njau, associate editor of Royal Media, Kenya,  
at Panos Eastern Africa’s national roundtable on the media  
and poverty reduction, December 2006

In this climate, poverty is often not considered newsworthy, though this changes during times of disaster and emergency when there are regular media reports of starvation and death. Poverty is such an everyday reality and so widespread that it is not considered of interest to public audiences and, therefore, not sellable. This perception, frequently found in the seven countries studied in this report, highlights the need for new angles and approaches to stories.

### Radio news: contrasting tales

In Africa’s increasingly competitive FM radio environment, news coverage is being squeezed as city-based radio stations give less priority to news, even axing news programmes altogether. The result is a reliance on ‘stringers’ and news agencies as newsrooms and staff are cut back – for example, FM stations in Uganda and Zambia are now sourcing news from external agencies such as the private Uganda Radio Network or the public news agency ZANIS. Whether financial survival drives staff cuts, or news programmes are simply squeezed to accommodate more money-spinning entertainment, this trend threatens the quality and range of reporting – and thus the space for coverage of public policy issues such as poverty reduction.

But there are exceptions to this trend. In Pakistan, where media restrictions forbid radios from broadcasting news bulletins, radio stations are trying to figure out ways to include news, not cut it back. One station was temporarily shut down in 2005 after transmitting BBC Urdu service news bulletins in violation of the law. But most radio stations get round the restrictions by packaging news as features, comment pieces, interviews, and other formats.<sup>41</sup>

Recent and current trends in media markets, therefore – whether driven by profit or the tough realities of financial survival – present a formidable structural challenge to assumptions or expectations that the mainstream media can play a strategic role in poverty reduction. But there are opportunities for the media to retain and extend their public service and public interest roles.

Media owners and editors have an important role to play. Mahfuz Anan, editor and publisher of Bangladesh’s *Daily Star*, for example, advocates self-enlightened leadership which does not put short-term commercial calculations ahead of longer-term considerations of how audiences might grow. ‘A soap company is one of our main advertisers. Like me, they have an interest in reducing poverty because they want to sell more soap. The notion of corporate social responsibility is now being recognised by the media and is driving its interest in social issues.’

41  
Comment from Sahar Ali, Panos South  
Asia country representative, Pakistan

Audiences certainly want entertainment from the media, but the media's commercial activity does not necessarily mean there is little or no interest in better coverage of public policy issues such as poverty reduction. Indeed, a 2003/04 study by the Uganda Broadcasting Council is reported to have shown that the greatest demand from radio listeners is better-quality information on development topics.<sup>42</sup>

**'People have become de-sensitised, and that includes journalists.'**

**Fahd Husain**, editor of *The News*, Pakistan,  
July 2005

Moreover, Fahd Husain, editor of Pakistan's *The News*, pointed out that, despite a danger of de-sensitisation to poverty, the media and the public are not indifferent to it, and new ways can be found to make the issue engaging (see p49). In Bangladesh, Sajjad Sharif, deputy editor of *Prothom Alo* (First Light) – one of Dhaka's biggest popular dailies – told us how his paper had set up a famine fund in response to readers' widespread concern about the devastating effects of annual famine on food production, income, employment, wages and indebtedness in the country's northern districts.

Stressing the legitimate primacy of newsworthiness, provided in this case by a disaster, Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of Bangladesh's *New Nation*, highlighted that even when the emphasis is on human suffering, there are often serious accountability issues at stake in poverty-related crises, which create new angles for the media.

### Political barriers and constraints

Where poverty reduction is politically sensitive, direct and indirect political controls and pressures on the media and journalists can also affect coverage of the issue. Political involvement in the media is widespread in the poorest countries. For example, the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), while in theory constitutionally insulated from government control, is in practice reported to be influenced by the state,<sup>43</sup> while programming at the public Zambia National Broadcasting Company (ZNBC) is also overseen by the government. Several radio stations and newspapers in Kenya, Uganda and Ghana are either fully or part-owned by local politicians and their allies or close associates. And, although the number of newspapers in Bangladesh has increased since the opening up of the media sector in 1990, Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of the *New Nation*, says that much of it is the result of 'political parties building their constituencies and public relations, and politicians promoting their political and business interests'.

Political pressure can also impose limits on what the media can cover. This raises questions about their independence and capacity to perform a public interest function on poverty reduction. Charles Mwanguhya Mpagi, deputy political editor of Uganda's *Daily Monitor*, says it is not uncommon for the government or politicians to censor coverage of stories that could show them in a bad light or threaten their particular interests, and that they see the media as a means to spread their own propaganda.

Where media companies are directly owned by politicians, this interference can be explicit, while in public media companies it is more subtle. For example, Zambian reporters are said to self-censor for fear of losing their jobs if they are critical of the government. If they do not censor themselves, their editors may do so.<sup>44</sup> In some countries, journalists also have to ensure their stories comply with the official secrets act, which we discuss in more detail on page 33.

42

Quoted in Gavin Anderson and Owen Kibenge, *Making Development Newsworthy: Getting Development into the Ugandan Mass Media*, International Labour Organization/Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency/FIT-Small Enterprise Media in Africa (undated), p7

43

S Kafewo (2006) *African Media Development Initiative: Ghana research findings and conclusions*, BBC World Service Trust, p19

44

According to one report, 'A very real process of self-censorship takes place, with one-sided stories carried through if the state is involved as the primary source of the story.' See F Banda (2006), *African Media Development Initiative: Zambia research findings and conclusions*, BBC World Service Trust, p24

Similarly, there are various reports of governments stifling critical debate in the private media, either by refusing to award lucrative contracts to companies that advertise in papers that are critical of the government, or by holding back, revoking or threatening not to renew licences to media houses.<sup>45</sup>

Politicians and bureaucrats have also been known to victimise journalists who expose failed development projects and government maladministration, and are not averse to exploiting weak freedom of expression provisions or repressive libel laws to try to silence journalists. This exercises a disincentive to the media to act as a force for better governance, for while journalists are usually acquitted, many may not want to take such risks.

### **Press restrictions and poverty questions in Pakistan**

In 2007 the eyes of the world turned to Pakistan when the offices of one of the country's most popular private TV channels were attacked by police after covering anti-government protests by lawyers supporting the ousted Chief Justice of Pakistan.<sup>46</sup> This raises the question of whether such a sensitive climate, fuelled by human rights concerns, might extend to stronger coverage of poverty reduction as a rights rather than a social welfare issue. The government has recognised poverty reduction as a challenge – both under the existing PRSP and as part of its medium-term expenditure framework in pursuit of the MDGs – but observers have claimed that it has proved sensitive when contentious issues such as land ownership and wealth redistribution enter the poverty debate.<sup>47</sup>

### **Public broadcasting – promoting a space for poverty debate?**

In principle, public, non-profit broadcasters should be able to focus on diverse information provision and public affairs coverage in addition to popular entertainment programmes. Because they are financed from tax revenues, such broadcasters are not driven exclusively by the need to win larger audiences or cater for mainstream tastes.

As a non-profit broadcaster financed from tax revenues, Zambia's ZNBC should be in a position to cover poverty-related issues as part of its response to a wider range of audiences with different public information needs. Nevertheless, civil society observers such as Ivy Mutwale of the Civil Society Poverty Reduction Network claim that private stations, such as Muvi TV, air more programmes with poverty-related content.

One way for public broadcasters to address political interference could be by raising finance through government-regulated licence fees, though the feasibility of this would need to be considered in countries where poverty is widespread and institutions often weak. But the absence of additional finance, beyond that made available from government taxes, is often a problem. Wilna Quarmyne of Ghana's Community Radio Network claims that the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, for example, has to meet its operating costs by competing for advertising revenue, which can put pressure on the public service dimensions of its programming.

<sup>45</sup> Comments from Suleiman Mustapha Dauda of *The Statesman*, Ghana; Martin Kapende, business editor of the *Zambia Daily Mail*; and Sahar Ali, Panos South Asia country representative, Pakistan

<sup>46</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/6583695.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/6583695.stm)

<sup>47</sup> Claims made by some participants at Panos South Asia's national roundtable on the media and poverty reduction held in Islamabad, Pakistan, on 21 July 2005



Researching a story in analytical depth also requires a greater investment of time to develop understanding of the issues, establish contacts and information sources... ”

### Financial and other resource constraints

The media industry is still quite young and under-resourced in many of the poorest countries. Journalists interviewed for this report and others attending the national media roundtables on poverty reduction organised by Panos identified a lack of financial resources as a key constraint to stronger reporting on poverty reduction and related issues.

In-depth reporting that covers a wider range of issues and viewpoints, including those of poor people, involves greater research and travel costs. Many media companies are small scale and cover limited parts of a country, with their reporters generally based in cities, while the most pressing and interesting poverty-related stories may be in rural areas. Editors – particularly at smaller newspapers and radio stations – often do not have budgets to cover transport and accommodation costs, though there are indications that this is changing in some countries.<sup>48</sup>

To overcome this problem, radio stations could collaborate with locally-based journalists, due to the relative ease with which radio journalists can file stories from rural locations – they only need a phone and voice recorder. For the print media, however, limited computer access and poor information and communications technology (ICT) connectivity in rural areas makes this more difficult.

Another option, which requires further research, might be for donors and other bodies interested in media development to support or establish press agencies with locally-based journalists who could include a focus on poverty-related issues and syndicate their stories. This could work for radio or print media. Existing press syndicates of journalists experienced in reporting on poverty issues might also be a way to strengthen local media coverage. Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of the *New Nation*, tells us that syndication was a stronger feature in Bangladesh in the 1990s and early 2000s, allowing editors to easily pick up syndicated stories to make their papers more readable and attractive.

Some journalists accompany CSOs to rural areas to cover stories, with expenses paid by the CSO. While this provides an incentive and may mean the poverty story eventually gets carried in cases where media houses are prepared to accept payment for coverage, it can raise numerous questions about media independence and ethics, as well as the journalistic worth and sustainability of such practices.

In some countries there can be tensions within the media over the levels of financial support and resources available in the cities compared to smaller towns and districts. In Bangladesh, for example, local journalists consider themselves to be under-supported and under-resourced in comparison with their counterparts in Dhaka, the capital. They also say they have weaker access to information, analytical resources and training. Dhaka-based journalists claim their comparatively stronger financial base needs to be maintained if they are to play an influential role at the political centre.<sup>49</sup>

### Time constraints, pay and editor interest

Lack of time is another major constraint on journalists' ability to strengthen their coverage of poverty reduction. Visiting poor communities and contacting the organisations that work with them to explore and take account of their views can be very time consuming in countries with poor infrastructure and transport. Researching a story in analytical depth also requires a greater investment of time to develop understanding of the issues, establish contacts and information sources, and so on. Short-staffed and under-resourced editors are often reluctant to afford reporters the time required, particularly in pressured news-driven environments where journalists are expected to cover several *beats* or themes, and where other subjects are seen as more topical and attractive.

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For example, Martin Kapende, business editor of the *Zambia Daily Mail*, indicated that larger newspapers such as the *Zambia Daily Mail*, *The Post*, and *Times of Zambia* and the ZNBC tend to be able to cover such costs now

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This section is based on views expressed by journalists during the national media roundtable on poverty reduction held by Panos South Asia in Bangladesh on 15 April 2007 and on observations from Panos South Asia's country representative, S M Mayeen Ahmed. Local newspapers are said to have a wider circulation but do not generate as much revenue as city-based ones, which charge higher prices from their relatively wealthier urban readers. Local papers complain that important local issues and stories are not taken up nationally, depriving them of national influence, though in response the Dhaka-based press questions the suitability of such material for its particular audiences

Journalists' pay and working conditions also have a bearing, and even good journalism is not always rewarded properly. ¶

Journalists' pay and working conditions also have a bearing, and even good journalism is not always rewarded properly. Freelancers, known as 'stringers', are paid for each story that is printed or aired. Their main incentive, therefore, is to write stories that will sell. Since their wage depends more on the number of stories they produce rather than quality, stringers have no financial incentive to invest time in research when there is no certainty their stories will be bought.

For salaried journalists,<sup>50</sup> some of whom may be on precarious short-term contracts, the pressure is not to sell their stories but to produce several a day. As a result, they only have time to write stories that 'scratch the surface' of poverty reduction, and rarely have time to travel.

If editors could be encouraged to buy poverty-related stories, then stringers would probably write them, and salaried reporters could be given editorial space and professional time to devote greater attention to the subject. But professional editors must first be convinced of their topical relevance to the public.<sup>51</sup> Their business is to boost circulation and audience figures: they will not print or broadcast stories for their own sake, however worthy the subject matter and however good the stories are.

Many journalists are often frustrated that their story ideas do not see the light of day as a result of the perceived effect of commercial and political pressures, or the perceived demands of set topics and reporting styles reflecting editors' assessment of 'what will sell'. But these are realities that both journalists and those seeking to interest the media must deal with, emphasising the need to pitch story ideas in ways that will do more to attract editors.

### Story research and access to information

Resource constraints compound the not uncommon view that much reporting on poverty-related issues can lack analytical depth and is often, in the words of Pakistani journalist Talat Hussain, 'event-based' rather than 'theme-based'. This is not so much a criticism of news-driven reporting – a crucial journalistic activity that can have a major impact on public perception of themes – but recognition that media coverage can hinge on unpredictable news pegs. Instead of systematically tracking and highlighting the significant developments on a given issue (such as a government's negotiation of a donor loan), priority is often given to the surface details of individual events rather than drawing public attention to the underlying substance of the issues at stake.

Some journalists argue that a big barrier to the stronger story research that such in-depth reporting would require is a lack of information and difficulties in accessing it when it is available.<sup>52</sup> We therefore look at this problem first and discuss some of the reasons for it.

### Official hurdles

Governments are in principle the prime holders and generators of information and analysis on poverty – for example, through household surveys. However, time, resources and commitment to strengthening systems and methods for collecting, collating and publishing data on a regular basis have often been insufficient in many countries. This means that available data is often out of date, incomplete, inconsistent or scattered over several sources and locations.

The rise of a stronger policy focus on poverty reduction in recent years, however, has led to greater investment in research initiatives to gather information on poverty. This has included not just empirical quantitative studies, but also qualitative research, looking at poor people's experience of poverty and its multiple dimensions beyond a narrow focus on income.

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A vital point is that journalists in low-income countries are often poorly paid, and this must in many cases have a knock-on effect on their skill levels, personal motivation and professional commitment to stronger reporting. For information on journalists' pay in Africa, see BBC World Service Trust (2006) *African Media Development Initiative: Research Summary Report*, pp136-138

51

The issue of editors' views and audience interest will be taken up again in Section 3, 'From poverty challenges to media solutions'

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For example, Kenyan journalists participating in the national media roundtable held by Panos Eastern Africa on 2 December 2006 said that it is sometimes too time consuming to access available information, while at other times it can be withheld by government authorities

But even when such material is available, the systems, financial and human resources and political commitment are not always in place to share it effectively. Strategies for disseminating such valuable information are often weak, with insufficient coordination within and between official institutions, let alone with the public or outside organisations. Such official communication problems directly affect the media as a gatekeeper of information and as a key civil society interface with the public.

Government provision of information to the media about the PRSP process has in many cases been poor and sporadic, with local journalists especially affected, as in the case of Bangladesh.

**‘Ninety per cent of newsrooms would not know what Pakistan’s poverty reduction strategy is about. Requests for information from the government are often not responded to. The government is shy, afraid and ill-prepared and its media managers are lost.’**

Fahd Husain, editor of *The News*, Pakistan,  
July 2005

Routine requests by journalists for information can be a slow, laborious process: they often have to make written requests to government officials, which can take several weeks to process. This is not just the case with requests for data on poverty or poverty strategies, but also in areas such as business and economics, where developments can have an important impact on prospects for poverty reduction.

With growing discussion of their positive or negative impact on poverty reduction, international trade rules and trade reform policies are a good case in point. African journalists told Panos that official information-sharing and communication with the media on trade and development is often weak, for two reasons: a lack of resources, personnel and relevant skills in government and state bodies; and overly bureaucratic, politically sensitive or secretive governments, which constrain lower-ranking officials who deal with information requests.

**‘Governments rarely want to talk openly about trade agreements that they may have entered into and usually take a defensive stance, raising further suspicion that they do not want to disclose “sensitive state secrets”.’**

Mildred Mpundu, freelance journalist,  
Zambia<sup>53</sup>

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Panos London (2007) ‘The role of the media in boosting public awareness and debate of trade policy-making’, in WTO (2007) *WTO Public Forum 2006: What WTO for the XXIst Century?*, p55

54

This act is now being considered by parliament, although it has been delayed for a considerable time and it will take a concerted effort to see it through parliament

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With donor support, governments implementing national development plans or PRSPs which are supported by development assistance are putting in place mechanisms and developing indicators to regularly monitor and report outcomes and impacts on poverty

There are also cases – for example, in Kenya, Uganda and Zambia – where governments deny information requests, sometimes employing colonially-inherited official secrets acts. Many journalists do not have the legal insight or ability to afford legal representation to challenge an official’s refusal to grant access to information, but they do still fight for improved access. Journalists in Zambia, for example, have mounted a campaign for a Freedom of Information Act.<sup>54</sup> Several journalists interviewed noted that freedom of information legislation is vital to bind policymakers and officials to provide information.

There are, however, signs that access to official data is beginning to improve as international donors give increased attention to evidence-based policymaking and aid effectiveness, which rely on effective data collection.<sup>55</sup>

“Government secrecy and red tape are often obstacles to accessing information but they are not necessarily insurmountable for journalists with persistence and initiative.”

With the trend towards providing general budget support, donors need to work with state bodies to strengthen data collection in order to account for the use of aid to their own parliaments and taxpayers.

Public sector governance reforms implemented as part of PRSPs and NDPs focus on improving the quality and efficiency of government data collection as well as transparency and access to data. This should facilitate access to data on poverty levels and poverty-related indicators, as well as on the budget and budget execution. For example, Ghana is one of many governments to launch websites on which they post poverty-related and budget data, or make available versions of their PRSP.<sup>56</sup> The Zambian government is one of several taking steps to involve the media in so-called technical or sectoral advisory groups aimed at bringing outside stakeholder opinion and expertise into the development and implementation of NDPs/PRSPs.

### Pursuing and using alternative sources

Government secrecy and red tape are often obstacles to accessing information but they are not necessarily insurmountable for journalists with persistence and initiative. By forming relationships with key government officials, journalists can get them to talk off the record and point to useful sources of information and contacts. Of course, building trust and rapport with government officials takes time, which is a constraint for many journalists.

In the interests of story balance, diversity and debate, journalists can search for information from unofficial sources instead, but in many cases, they continue to rely on official information. In former one-party political systems this could be because of the legacy of media controls, where the state is still seen as the prime and only allowable source; or because journalists have yet to become fully aware of the wider range of alternative sources that now exist in civil society.<sup>57</sup>

Although journalists tend to be based in urban areas, they should still be able to track down alternative sources of information on poverty. While the poorest communities may not live in cities (although many do), CSOs, private consultancies, research institutes and universities can provide alternative, city-based sources of information and analysis. However, many journalists are not proactively seeking these out.

CSOs in many countries are developing mechanisms to monitor NDP/PRSP implementation, which generate complementary and alternative data on corruption, access to public services, flows of resources, and progress against poverty indicators.<sup>58</sup> Data from CSOs is often qualitative, which can provide a different perspective from the government's quantitative data. Also, with more CSOs engaging in advocacy work as opposed to service delivery, they are producing more in-depth analytical reports on key policy issues relevant to poverty reduction.

Another important alternative source, especially with the promotion of the private sector as part of economic growth strategies, might be the different parts of the business community, ranging from large national and international companies to smaller entrepreneurs. They will have their own different views of 'pro-poor growth', contrasting with those of, say, CSOs or government ministries. Their activities also affect and involve poor people.

Private consultants, research institutions and universities regularly undertake research on behalf of the government or donors. While some of this might be confidential, many donor-generated studies are made public on request or available from government NDP/PRSP websites. For example, donors are increasingly commissioning consultants to carry out public expenditure tracking surveys, which monitor the flow of government resources (for example, on educational or health-related supplies), and consumer perception surveys concerning the quality of public services. Academics may also undertake their own research.

<sup>56</sup> See Ghana's National Development Planning Commission website at [www.ndpc.gov.gh/](http://www.ndpc.gov.gh/)

<sup>57</sup> Panos London (2006) *Trade challenges, media challenges: strengthening trade coverage beyond the headlines*, p10 [www.wto.org/english/forums\\_e/public\\_forum\\_e/trade\\_challenges.pdf](http://www.wto.org/english/forums_e/public_forum_e/trade_challenges.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> A Wood (2006) *Beyond data: A panorama of civil society experiences with monitoring*, Cordaid, Den Haag



A problem for many journalists is that, while CSO reports tend to advocate given positions, academic research strives for objectivity or a guarded neutrality, covering various hypotheses and multiple arguments in complex terms and abstract jargon. All of this can obscure its relevance to the political, economic and social issues of the day and may seem inaccessible to journalists.

But while the media like topical information that gets to the point and engages an audience in plain language – and many researchers could make their material more accessible with little or no sacrifice to its content – journalists could also develop the critical knowledge and skills they need to decipher and glean information from these complex sources and articulate the key points in topical stories aimed at wider public audiences.<sup>59</sup> Often, whether through time pressure, insufficient knowledge of issues and possible sources, or the need for greater professional rigour, this expertise can be weak. At worst, some journalists simply lift stories straight from single sources of ready-made information such as speeches or press releases.<sup>60</sup> Training for journalists on the gathering and use of information from different sources would be therefore invaluable to facilitate more in-depth reporting.

**‘The problem is not so much the lack of information, but the ability to interpret it and put it to potent use, targeting the right audiences at the right time on the right issues.’**

Talat Hussain, journalist, Pakistan,  
July 2005

This weakness in gathering information means that the media can miss highly newsworthy stories that are relevant to poverty reduction. For example, debate has been raging in Zambia about the allegedly poor level of tax revenue and royalty payments in contracts awarded to mining companies during the 1990s, especially now that high copper prices could boost national income. Yet, as Martin Kapende, business editor of the *Zambia Daily Mail*, acknowledges, it was a UK NGO – Christian Aid – rather than the media that unearthed the agreements and took the initiative to place them in the public arena. However, he did note that the media are now likely to devote coverage to the issue.

### The challenge of in-depth coverage and developing critical expertise

Observations about the shortcomings of ‘event-based’ reporting are not confined to members of the media: those involved in civil society activism, policy research or development communication have also voiced concerns, claiming that mainstream media reporting can be superficial and fails to capture the full story or the wider issues at stake (see box on page 37).

**‘There are lots of poverty stories, but they lack depth. Statement-based journalism has stunted the development of journalists, who have too often taken the value of the information for granted. Lacking has been an approach in which journalists go out, meet people, hunt information down, analyse it and then write their stories.’**

Fahd Husain, editor of *The News*, Pakistan,  
July 2005

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As highlighted by Kenyan journalist John Kamau, for example, referring to the challenges of covering a complex poverty-related issue such as international trade negotiations in the WTO, the ability of the media to interpret critically different sources of information and policy views becomes even more important when the competing positions are contested on the political stage. As note 53, p58

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This is not to dismiss the importance and usefulness of effective packaging of information for journalists, for example by civil society, or journalists’ use of them. It is to suggest that journalists need to use such information more critically and also exploit the value of the wider range of resources that exist

“With poverty reduction unlikely to become a specialist topic, policy actors such as CSOs, policy research bodies, parliamentarians, government officials and donors must seek ways to improve their methods of informing journalists.”

Journalists, they say, tend to follow the official agenda, rather than help shape it through wider exploration of underlying issues, approaching the people affected, and presenting different sides to the debate. This means there can often be little portrayal of the human face of poverty or discussion of why poverty exists and the policies and measures needed to overcome it.

Better information-gathering skills will not bring optimal results alone; they need to be part of a more in-depth approach to covering stories that are relevant to poverty reduction. Editors and reporters need to develop thematic knowledge and critical skills to cover poverty-related issues more effectively. They often have no specific training and background in economic and social issues, which impairs their ability to understand and cover complex issues – even those relating to core topics of interest to the media such as business and economics.

In one study for Panos in Zambia, for example, 79 per cent of journalists interviewed did not possess a solid background in economic and business reporting, while 21 per cent reported having only attended short post-qualification courses and seminars in development studies, economics and business reporting. They admitted to limited understanding of a number of mainstream economic terms necessary for analysis of economic trends, and said they experienced difficulties in interpreting and presenting them to the public. They reported confusion around the roles of donor organisations and aid institutions, as well as aid and development processes.<sup>61</sup> A similar story emerged for Mozambique,<sup>62</sup> while a lack of analytical skills on economic issues is reported to have hindered media examination of Bangladesh's PRSP. According to one editor from the country, no more than three newspapers had specialist reporters who could critically examine the document.<sup>63</sup>

There is often little incentive for journalists to acquire a sound technical and thematic knowledge that would enable them to write in depth about complex poverty-related policy issues, many of which can be socially and politically controversial. Specialisation, with the exception of key subjects, is rarely rewarded, and journalists with specialist interests are not necessarily better placed to secure jobs.

With poverty reduction unlikely to become a specialist topic, policy actors such as CSOs, policy research bodies, parliamentarians, government officials and donors must seek ways to improve their methods of informing journalists. They could encourage the media to incorporate coverage of poverty-related issues into key beats such as business and economics. For this to succeed, editors would need to support reporters with critical skills training and give them the necessary space to develop a wider range of contacts and information sources.

<sup>61</sup>  
As note 39

<sup>62</sup>  
See Panos Southern Africa (2005) *A case study of media coverage of trade and aid issues in Mozambique and Zambia*, Lusaka

<sup>63</sup>  
Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of the *New Nation*, intervening at Panos South Asia's national roundtable on the media and poverty reduction in Bangladesh on 15 April 2007. Knowledge of journalists outside Dhaka would seem to be particularly low. According to a survey on media awareness of the PRSP presented to this event, 91 per cent of journalists outside the capital were not familiar with the country's PRSP

**‘The media cannot often afford specialisation, except on things such as politics, sport, economics and business, and crime. Poverty is not seen as a beat in itself.’**

Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of the *New Nation*, Bangladesh, April 2007

To diversify reporting and ensure more in-depth coverage, one media representative at Panos' roundtable in Pakistan advocated the need for journalists to develop 'networking' strategies to build links with different policy actors so as to gain better access to a wider range of relevant information and opinions. This does not mean that the media should sacrifice its 'independence', becoming a mouthpiece for particular interest groups or positions. Instead, contact with a wider range of sources would bring benefits to both parties, with the media maintaining critical judgement, representing and commenting fairly on different views.<sup>64</sup>

### **Kenya's Constituency Development Fund – the new media 'sport'?**

Kenya's Constituency Development Fund (CDF) has been promoted as a flagship initiative to decentralise resources and decision-making to the benefit of poverty reduction. But media scrutiny of the controversies surrounding its operation has often lacked depth, argues **Yobo Rutin**, a regular media commentator on current affairs in the country.

Extensive media reporting on the Kenyan government's CDF reflects the fact that the government promotes it as a successful example of development planning involving parliamentarians and their constituents. But the media spotlight on politicians is often highly personalised, allowing crucial policy issues to fade into insignificance. For example:

- November 2006: The *Daily Nation* reported that the MP for Saboti seized the keys of the local CDF office and disbanded its administrative committee, accusing it of theft. The MP subsequently handed out cheques and a female committee member fled as the public bayed for her blood. However, the article offered no details on how the theft occurred or its implications for the operation of the CDF.
- February 2007: TV stations reported a confrontation between angry constituents and the MP for Kamukunji over the use of CDF funds. The MP argued that because the amount was paltry, the CDF committee had banked it to earn interest. The stories concentrated on the altercation, and failed to examine how the constituents thought the fund should have been used; why the MP thought it was a paltry amount, given local poverty levels; or how the fund might have been used to reduce poverty in the constituency.

These events offered an opportunity for the media to highlight critical governance and implementation problems with the CDF, yet they failed to draw them out or explain how they would affect poverty reduction goals.

### **The media and governance: the need for supporting institutions**

Journalists may be discouraged from playing a more active scrutiny role if there is little likelihood of the official bodies or private actors being held to account. Journalists can break news of government and donor failures, business abuses or non-governmental bad practices, but they need to be backed up by independent, formal systems and effective public interest institutions to investigate and deal with them accordingly.

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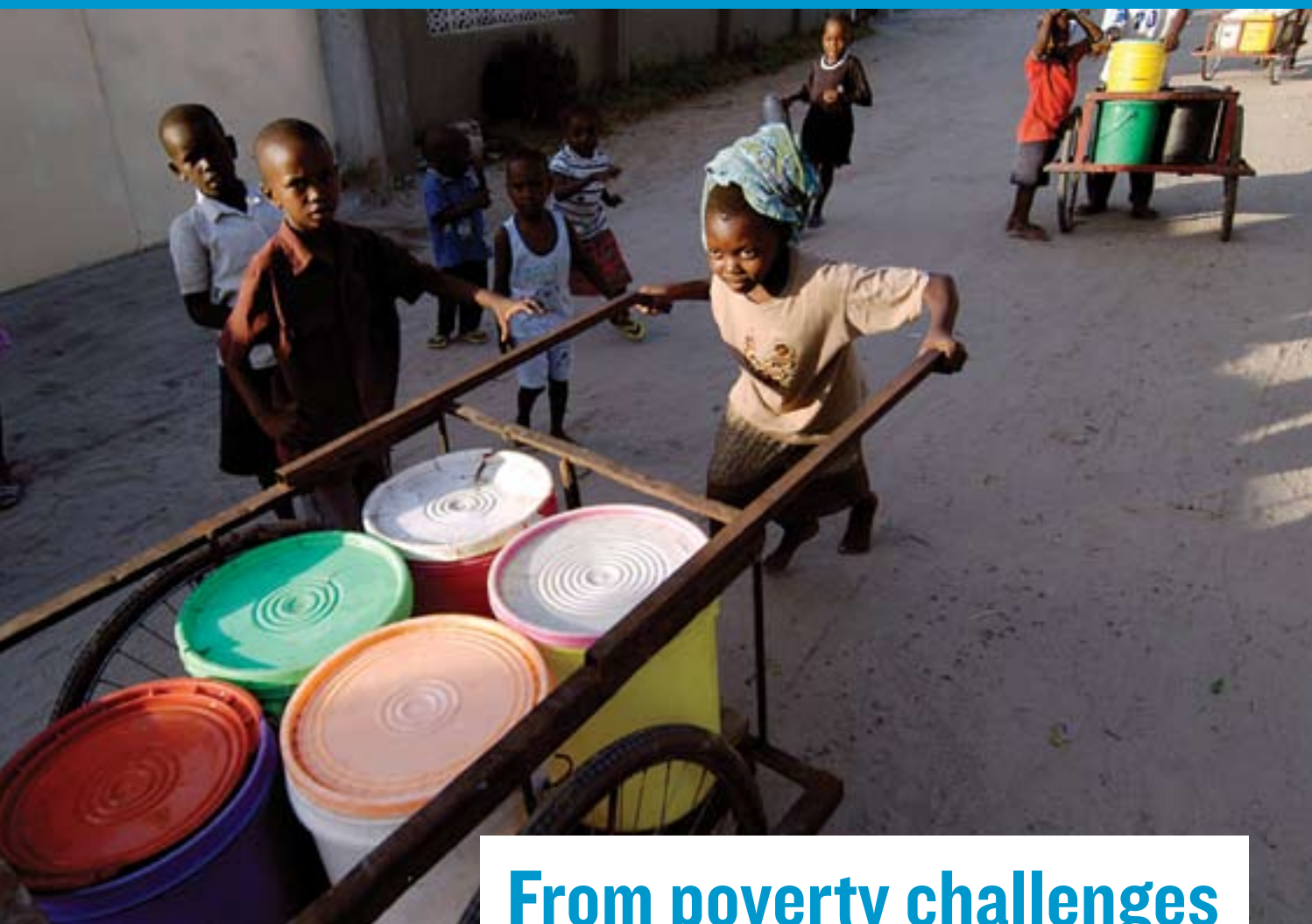
View expressed at Panos South Asia's national roundtable on the media and poverty reduction held in Islamabad, Pakistan, on 21 July 2005

Donors are already encouraging governments to establish independent audit offices and judiciaries as part of a package of governance reforms. Civil society organisations are also active on governance and accountability issues, and there is growing interest in the role of parliaments and local governments. Ideally, the role and needs of the media could be considered by the actors involved in all these developments.

But any aspirations for the media to play a stronger scrutiny role will need to involve much greater attention to the challenge of developing the stronger knowledge, critical skills, and information-gathering skills covered in this section. Without them, independent media reporting could be compromised, as journalists' challenges to the performance and practices of public and private actors risk falling prey to the self-interested promptings of given interest groups seeking coverage skewed in their favour.

Within civil society, some even argue that the media, as actors traditionally linked with the extension of democratic accountability, would benefit from a stronger and wider understanding of human rights – economic, social and cultural, as well as civil and political. This is not to suggest that the media become human rights advocates or experts themselves, but that those active in this area could share tips with journalists as to how an understanding of human rights disciplines could help them consider different issues in reporting.





There are divided views on whether policies introduced alongside poverty reduction strategies benefit everyone. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, privatisation of the water utility company allegedly led to some people having their domestic drinking water supply cut off. Reporting their story would make the connection between ordinary people and national policies.

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## From poverty challenges to media solutions

In the previous section we discussed the numerous obstacles that limit the media's capacity to stimulate the informed, inclusive public debate that could make a distinct contribution to poverty reduction efforts. In this section we explore possible solutions to these problems, and suggest opportunities that could benefit policy actors and the media alike.

### Media and civil society: the need for stronger interaction

Judging by many discussions at Panos stakeholder roundtables and in individual interviews, there are signs that journalists and CSOs are both aware that greater interaction and understanding between them could bring mutual benefits. Because CSOs often work in areas inaccessible to journalists, they are an important source of on-the-ground information and analysis on poverty reduction issues, particularly in the event of an epidemic, food crisis or disasters. However, CSOs also need to attract and sustain media interest in equally vital, if less dramatic, poverty reduction and development stories.

Working with the media helps CSOs communicate with as wide an audience as possible. This does not imply that CSOs and the media automatically share common interests: indeed, good journalists need to maintain critical independence from all interest groups and positions, while CSOs have every right to use the media to promote their own views and strong messages to the public. But despite differences of opinion and professional approaches, they could still draw more effectively on each other's strengths in their engagement with the development process.

Panos' national roundtable meetings on the media and poverty reduction have indicated, however, that interaction and collaboration between the two have often been fraught with difficulty.

Members of the media can be frustrated by a perceived assumption on the part of CSOs that the media should be there to publicise their views or profile, and some journalists complain that they are treated as a mere 'conveyor belt'.<sup>65</sup> For them, this perceived attitude ignores the media's principles of objectivity and independence, and they resent what they see as pressure to accept what they sometimes consider to be CSOs' unsubstantiated claims, political rhetoric and 'given positions'. They say CSOs often do not understand their need to investigate and verify views and alleged facts. CSOs, on the other hand, often mistrust the media's capacity to report their issues accurately or claim that media coverage reflects a superficial grasp of the policies and issues affecting the social constituencies they work with or represent.<sup>66</sup>

### Beyond financial incentives?

Whether the result of real differences, misunderstandings or a tendency to stereotype, the views the media and CSOs often hold about each other limit the emergence of more productive relationships. They also reinforce the problems associated with the not uncommon practice of CSOs paying for media coverage and the media accepting or expecting such payments.

If a CSO wants to get a story published, it often has to pay for print space or airtime. Journalist Jonathan Adabre from Ghana's *Public Agenda*<sup>67</sup> thinks this reflects the perception in some parts of the media that reporting on CSO concerns and activities is tantamount to advertising and not a matter of newsworthy public interest. Their stories are therefore charged like commercial or government advertisements. While the media's commercial orientation is often criticised by CSOs, and though their financial clout cannot be compared with commercial or government advertisers, many are willing to pay to get their stories published if this ensures they are published in full and accurately. This reflects a general mistrust of journalists to represent their views fairly and cover their issues properly.

**'The first and foremost duty of the media is to be a disseminator of information. I'm not averse to media teaming up with NGOs at the grassroots. But the power of the media is our presence. Being an on-ground active partner will limit media's role. But using their platform to source information is different.'**

**Talat Hussain**, director of news and current affairs, Aaj TV, Pakistan, April 2007

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This was the term used by one journalist attending Panos Southern Africa's national roundtable on the media and poverty reduction in Zambia on 18 August 2005

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One survey in Uganda, for example, revealed that 75 per cent of development professionals viewed the media as unprofessional, while 85 per cent felt the media covered development issues poorly and considered that they or their organisations had been misquoted by the media. See G Anderson and O Kibenge, as note 42, p6

67

See [www.ghanaweb.com/public\\_agenda/index.php](http://www.ghanaweb.com/public_agenda/index.php)

Individual journalists may also expect to be paid – at least enough to meet their expenses – before they agree to cover a story promoted by a CSO. While some editors and reporters consider that such payments undermine media credibility and independence, it is a common practice that underscores the frequent resource problems in the media.

Many CSOs are resource-constrained themselves. But perceptions in the media that some CSOs – especially those funded by international agencies and foreign donors or implementing social development contracts awarded by the state – are awash with money can lead to journalists expecting financial remuneration in return for coverage of civil society issues.

Given the frequently low pay and poor conditions of journalists, payment-for-coverage arrangements are a complex and sensitive matter. While what some have called the 'brown envelope' culture within the media is often

*CSOs should produce resources tailored specifically for media consumption. CSOs often criticise the media for supposed indifference or sloppy journalism, but this is often because journalists lack knowledge of the issues or have not received support to develop the critical skills they need to cover them effectively. »*

manifested in its dealings with more financially powerful commercial and political sectors, its effects on relations with civil society can also be damaging and confusing, if not necessarily for the same reasons. Both the media and civil society have an interest in addressing this problem. As well as the ethical questions raised, coverage-for-payment solutions, say some analysts,<sup>68</sup> harm the prospects of sustainable, independent journalism that is in the longer-term interests of the media and the development sector. Such payments reorient journalists' attention to financial incentives rather than newsworthiness or topical relevance of proposed stories. Similarly, CSOs' purchase of editorial space or airtime reduces the editorial involvement of reporters, who may doubt the journalistic worth and impact of the items carried.

### **Mutual understanding, respect and benefits**

When CSOs and journalists form trusting and effective working relations, the value each sees in the other can quickly transform the relationship. For example, Ghana's SEND Foundation<sup>69</sup> and Zambia's Civil Society for Poverty Reduction network (CSPR)<sup>70</sup> have both made extensive efforts to build relationships with journalists, which have paid off in terms of getting considerably more media coverage of their issues (see box on page 44). Journalists looking for comments on breaking stories will often call them, and they feed stories to journalists without necessarily having to pay.

If the media and CSOs are to build more constructive relationships, assumptions, behaviour and professional approach need to change on both sides, with each recognising the strengths, weaknesses and distinctive roles of the other, and addressing its own shortcomings. The first step may often need to be taken by CSOs, reflecting the fact that they need the media more than the media need them.

CSOs should produce resources tailored specifically for media consumption. CSOs often criticise the media for supposed indifference or sloppy journalism, but this is often because journalists lack knowledge of the issues or have not received support to develop the critical skills they need to cover them effectively. Journalists who do have commitment and expertise often complain that, while some CSOs are a valuable source of information and analysis, this often does not come in a form they can easily digest and use. They say CSOs use jargon that few journalists are familiar with or over-burden them with lengthy documents whose key points are not well presented and immediately clear.

This suggests that while journalists could often benefit from sifting through resources to extract valuable information and analytical insights, many CSOs are making this much harder for them than it should be. CSOs could attract the media more informatively and facilitate stronger reporting on key issues by producing briefings that guide journalists through the terminology, policy processes and issues, highlighting the potentially relevant angles they could cover. CSO press releases, journalists say, can lack key facts and the salient newsworthy points, and the organisation of press conferences is often not tailored to the media's needs. CSOs need to issue shorter statements with clear, succinct points and recommendations and sharp, pithy soundbites.<sup>71</sup>

A frequent lack of knowledge of how best to package analysis and materials for the media is symptomatic of the fact that advocacy is still a relatively new role for many CSOs in low-income countries. Many do not yet understand the practical needs of journalists, the professional pressures and constraints they operate under, or the overall opportunities and limitations of working with the media.

68

The points made here draw extensively on Anderson and Kibenge (as note 42), who argue that the media needs to be nurtured as 'an independent platform for analysis and debate and not as a paid messenger of development information'

69

See [www.sendfoundation.org/index.asp](http://www.sendfoundation.org/index.asp)

70

See [www.cspr.org.zm/index.html](http://www.cspr.org.zm/index.html)

71

Anderson and Kibenge (as note 42) p12. The authors note that in one survey in Uganda, 80 per cent of journalists stated that few press releases from development agencies and NGOs were newsworthy, rating them as the least newsworthy source after government, politicians and private companies. This may of course indicate a media preference for using these other sources, but it also suggests that development NGOs and other CSOs often have weak media relations capacity

Journalists have often expressed a desire to move beyond the 'workshop culture' to develop a greater understanding of issues affecting people on the ground and cover the politics of these issues. CSOs should consider this in developing a new approach to the media. »

CSOs can also get the timing wrong in their interactions with the media. A lack of awareness of media deadlines may mean that CSOs schedule press conferences or issue press releases at inappropriate times. They may also fail to time the release of a report, for example, to coincide with a national or international event that the media can link the report to.

CSOs urgently need to invest in more sophisticated ways of interacting with the media. The short-term 'solution' of paying for coverage seems to be under threat – for example, Warren Nyamugasira from Uganda's NGO Forum says that some radio stations are now much less willing to air such paid programmes because they can earn more from commercial advertising.

### Support for CSO media skills

One possible conclusion from this analysis is that international NGOs and donors should consider devoting more attention and resources to building national CSOs' media and communications capacity to complement their growing advocacy and policy research. CSOs would then be able to provide journalists with what they need to cover issues such as poverty reduction, in turn undermining the distorting effect of financial incentives on the media agenda.

While the media need to take the initiative in approaching CSOs for their analysis and points of view, CSOs need to educate the media about why their issues are important and to cultivate individual relationships with journalists. Workshops, if organised well and in ways relevant to journalists, may provide an important space to raise their awareness of pressing poverty issues and how they connect with their daily reporting concerns, as well as useful opportunities for journalists to meet and cultivate contacts with CSOs and policymakers. But such events have often been criticised on both sides.<sup>72</sup> At Panos South Asia's roundtable on the media and poverty reduction in Bangladesh in April 2007, Hassan Shahriah, executive editor of the *Daily Ittefaq* newspaper, one of numerous editors to attend, complained that many civil society events in his experience had tended to talk 'at' the media and alienate journalists by showing little practical understanding of their professional role and interests. As a result, he had not found them useful and advocated the need for the media to set up their own training events to develop expertise in covering development issues.

Journalists have often expressed a desire to move beyond the 'workshop culture' to develop a greater understanding of issues affecting people on the ground and cover the politics of these issues. CSOs should consider this in developing a new approach to the media.

### Politics, civil society and attracting the media

The media, for their part, may need to take stronger account of the diversity of the CSO sector and tailor their approach accordingly. CSOs are far from homogeneous, either in identity and structure, mission and political orientation, financial health, or degree of social legitimacy. Community-based organisations and national social movements, while member-based, may have different perspectives and styles of work. The ethos and practical approach of grassroots support NGOs linked to poor people and their organisations may differ from those of urban-based NGOs comprised of professionals.

Clarity and understanding between the two sides are particularly important when it comes to their respective interests in media coverage of more political issues. Indeed, CSOs vary considerably in political terms. They can:

- consider themselves totally independent of government and party politics
- be tightly allied to a particular political perspective

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Anderson and Kibenge (as note 42, p15) claim that, in Uganda, such events, while valuable when organised well, too often lack clear objectives and fail to meet journalists' needs, and that good media professionals are also put off by the frequent presence of 'non-serious' journalists attending for 'free lunches'



“Beyond CSOs, other policy actors and stakeholders – parliamentarians, business groups, consultants, academics and government officials – also need to build relationships with the media.”

- work closely with the grassroots in development support activities and service delivery, and sometimes combine this with advocacy and campaigning
- concentrate on monitoring and lobbying governments, through research, advocacy and public campaigns.

Media insiders argue that CSOs need to be bolder, clearer or more critical in their statements. Jonathan Adabre, from Ghana’s *Public Agenda*, for example, argues that reporting on development issues such as poverty reduction is less attractive when CSOs ‘are not creating civic outrage and generating controversy’.

For Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of Bangladesh’s *New Nation*, the issue is less one of CSOs failing to court attention than disappointment, in his view, that they can be too cautious: ‘While the media can be daring, NGOs can sometimes lack courage. We once carried a tough article criticising policies on HIV/AIDS, but the statement put out by the NGOs did not match the critical edge of our piece. They were more cautious.’

But while CSOs may need to consider injecting greater political (but not party political) spice into their statements to engage the media, this can be tricky. Some campaigning CSOs may rightly wish to provoke controversy to sharpen political debate. But this approach is not necessarily in the interests of CSOs preferring constructive, if critical, engagement with policymakers.

CSOs have every right to steer a careful course through choppy party political waters and may be wise to do so. Many do not want to be labelled either pro- or anti-government to prevent being dismissed as biased, or becoming vulnerable to official reprisals or political manipulation. However, skilled CSOs should be able to provide journalists with sharp political insights, without necessarily resorting to controversial tactics as a basis for media stories.

CSOs involved in advocacy and campaigning are particularly relevant to the media’s concern with politics. But even in this case, their roles may differ, and some organisations can combine several within their own structure. These include campaigning, acting as a government watchdog, or formulating and promoting policy proposals and dialogue with decision-makers. So, just as the media may wish to consider which aspects of civil society work it is most likely to source stories from, CSOs may need to be clearer about how their objectives and activities can best attract different journalists in order to engage key target audiences at different levels.

Whatever the approach, the media do need clear and newsworthy information to work with. As Jonathan Adabre points out: ‘Nobody discusses neutral issues.’ He recommends that CSOs be ‘objective in their reports, but critical in their PR’.

Beyond CSOs, other policy actors and stakeholders – parliamentarians, business groups, consultants, academics and government officials – also need to build relationships with the media. Their different perspectives, information and analysis will allow the media to complete their ‘political picture’ and provide balance and diversity of coverage.

“The first priority must be to help the media to understand what your organisation is about.”

### **Making relations with the media work: the experience of Zambia's Civil Society for Poverty Reduction network**

For journalists in Zambia, the CSPR network is a vital source of alternative, reliable factual analysis and informed opinion and they regularly contact the network for comment. CSPR nurtures this positive working relationship with the media through annual interaction meetings.

The first annual meeting involved a series of short workshops with two aims: to inform journalists about the issues CSPR and its members work on, and to learn about journalists' needs. Ivy Mutwale of CSPR believes that to engage the media, CSOs need to explain the significance of their work and convey their passion to journalists. 'The first priority must be to help the media to understand what your organisation is about,' she says. 'That does not mean who the organisation is, but what it works on. What is important is that the issues are discussed, not who CSPR is.'

The annual meetings update journalists on CSPR's work, highlighting and advising them on important up-coming issues. For example, in 2006 CSPR produced a time-line for journalists to follow the development of the Fifth National Development Plan (NDP). CSPR also helps journalists identify poverty angles in their political stories.

In 2007 meetings looked at how to involve provincial radio stations. Following feedback from journalists, CSPR also took them to visit one of its poverty monitoring sites in rural Lusaka so that they could speak directly with poor people. The result was extensive media coverage, which raised public debate in the letters column of one newspaper on the role of the local member of parliament.

CSPR has also used the annual meetings to learn more about the media's needs, and has responded to media feedback – for example, by setting up an email list to inform journalists of new reports. CSPR also encourages journalists to call at any time, and several do – the network deals directly with general poverty issues, while specific issues are fielded to its members with the most knowledge. CSPR's policy is not to comment on issues on which they are not conversant, and that all comments should be evidence-based.

At first, journalists put pressure on CSPR to come up with comments immediately. However, they have learned to accept that CSPR needs time to formulate them, just as CSPR has learned how and when to issue press releases and how to package reports for journalists. CSPR can now get a short news article published the next day, often with a longer follow-up article.

Ivy and other CSPR staff have been able to build relationships with journalists and now understand how they work. This effort has paid off: CSPR only pays for a story if it wants it to be published in full, while staff members are regularly invited onto radio and TV programmes to provide analysis and alternative ideas.

Ivy perceives a growing interest in the media to hold the government to account, 'as long as they don't have to do the research themselves'. A CSPR press release timed with the launch of the NDP pointed to the need to monitor its implementation; the media now await CSPR's reports on whether the budget and NDP are aligned with poverty reduction objectives.

## Exploring editors' views and audience interests

Much can be done to raise individual journalists' awareness of poverty reduction issues and the significant opportunities for stories they provide, including workshops, information materials and specific training on given themes.<sup>73</sup> However, for more effective sustainable progress to be made, there has to be interest and commitment from media owners and editors.<sup>74</sup>

The SEND Foundation in Ghana, despite progress in working relations with the media, has observed that simply raising journalists' awareness of the issues of how and where to locate data and who to contact does not necessarily mean that they will always undertake or sustain more in-depth journalism. Resource and professional support problems continue to outweigh the short-term benefits of such training. So, although journalists may be more willing to cover poverty-related issues, current professional circumstances dictate that CSOs and others may in many cases still have to track down and analyse the information for them.

This begs the question of whether media leaders and managers are prepared to invest in overcoming the often inter-related structural problems. Panos discussions with individual editors suggest that, although they often recognise the importance of poverty reduction as a public policy issue, the problem often boils down to whether the subject can be realistically treated as a specialist subject, and whether it can engage public audiences. Without audiences, media owners and editors will be disinclined to devote resources, professional support and editorial space. They need them to survive and grow commercially.

One important priority therefore must be to listen to the views of editors – as professional information gatekeepers linking media houses, journalists and the public – of what they consider to be the constraints and opportunities for greater and stronger coverage of policy issues relevant to poverty reduction. Their views of how this challenge can best be met must be an important starting point for continued dialogue.

Studies on audiences' interests, where necessary, might be one way of finding out whether, how and on what issues different policy actors and journalists could pitch stories and find new angles to attract and engage different parts of the public. However, gathering and assessing such feedback is a challenge, and many media houses in the poorest countries may not see this as a priority because of daily deadline pressures and the costs involved.<sup>75</sup> But, given the importance of 'public demand' for both policy actors and the media alike, it is a task that cannot be entirely overlooked, especially in the light of changing social structures and public tastes as well as the uncertainties and rapid shifts within the media industry itself.<sup>76</sup>

## Pitching and crafting engaging stories

Media owners and editors may be encouraged to improve resources, training and other forms of professional support if they are presented with clearer and stronger ideas for good poverty stories. One problem is that poverty has mainly been seen as an issue of social or humanitarian need, and less as a 'political' issue that the policy process could help address.

When such links are made in a skilful way – either by or for the media – the potential for attractive stories seems to emerge, especially when the media have new facts, insights, events or ground-breaking policy developments to cover. For example, an initiative involving editors in Kenya to raise public debate of inequality through coverage of its factual realities persuaded them that such stories would find a receptive audience. Far from being un-newsworthy, the coverage repeatedly captivated the public (see box on the next page).

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Deputy political editor Charles Mwanguhya Mpagi of Uganda's *Daily Monitor* mentioned journalists' clubs as a more informal way of influencing and helping to change journalists' attitudes. Panos Eastern Africa hosts monthly meetings for journalists which provide an opportunity for them to reflect on particular issues, such as HIV, and on current issues within the media

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As discussed by journalists at Panos Southern Africa's national roundtable in Mozambique on the media and poverty reduction on 4 December 2006. In a positive move, some 14 editors attended a specific follow-up consultation to explore the practical steps needed to support such a commitment

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As noted on page 29 and in note 42, reporting strong audience interest in greater coverage of development issues in Uganda and active public responses to poverty crises in Bangladesh, it is possible that public interest in poverty reduction coverage may be higher than imagined, though much wider research would be needed in different countries to verify this and to gauge accurately what kinds of coverage would most attract and engage different public audiences. Commercial pressures may in any case affect the extent to which any such potential interest is met by coverage. According to a Panos Eastern Africa report of a media workshop held in Mukono, Uganda, in 2004, for example, several editors voiced concern that greater reporting of development issues was hampered by media owners' alleged insistence on covering 'only what sells'

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Martin Kapende, business editor of the *Zambia Daily Mail*, reports that a new publication, *Zambian Analysis*, did a survey on the need for in-depth analytical news for the business sector, with the findings confirming the existence of audience demand in this case

### Making headlines, sparking debate

Poverty issues have recently made the news in Kenya. Journalist **Rosemary Okello Orlale**, executive director of the African Woman and Child Feature Service (AWC), describes how her organisation worked with editors to harness the power of the media behind a national campaign on the thorny issue of inequality in the country.

Despite being the most unequal country in east Africa, the fifth most disparate in Africa and the tenth globally, equity was one of the least talked about subjects in Kenya. This changed with the release of a 2004 study backed by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the national government,<sup>77</sup> which highlighted the gap between rich and poor and showed that power and economic wealth lie in the hands of only a few Kenyans. It revealed huge disparities in society between sexes, regions and classes.

The report – the result of the Rich and Poor Project (RAPP)<sup>78</sup> – provoked intense media debate, as part of a government and donor campaign to initiate and encourage national dialogue on inequality. The inequality debate is also one the media cannot afford to ignore: a vibrant media industry cannot thrive in a largely poor and illiterate environment.

Arguing that the media needed to be a crucial component of the campaign, RAPP partner AWC developed a strategy to bring them on board. This included sensitisation workshops to influence editorial thinking about how inequality issues should be reported, and to strengthen journalists' reporting, analysis and investigation skills. It also focused on how the media could engage the public in debates through talk shows, features and TV documentaries.

To engage the interest and support of editors, AWC argued that ordinary people were tired of the authoritative voice of central government on issues that affected them and that there was a need to focus more on local strategies and inspiring stories. This dialogue with editors saw the National Editors Guild commit to creating space for such news.

Backed with solid training, regular briefings, a supply of information, and measures to include community voices, RAPP led to good media coverage over two years. The impact was immense, culminating in a national conference on equity and growth in May 2006.<sup>79</sup> This brought together government, policymakers, civil society and donor stakeholders, and ended with expressions of government commitment to tackle inequality. The media coverage helped change public awareness of poverty and inequality – people are now aware that the government has the power to change the situation, and are demanding accountability.

Although inequality has become part of the media's language, the project highlighted the need for continuous dialogue with editors and reporters to ensure that coverage of inequality issues does not become event-driven, but rather part of weekly programme content, planning and policy, with reporters given more space to report on them. Experts could also be identified as commentary writers.

<sup>77</sup> Society for International Development (SID) et al (2004), *Pulling Apart: Facts and Figures on Inequality in Kenya*, Nairobi, <http://www.sidint.org/files/report/pulling-apart%5B1%5D.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> The 'Rich and Poor: National Discourses on Poverty, Inequality, and Growth' project (RAPP) was implemented jointly by SID, the Ministry of Planning and National development, and SIDA

<sup>79</sup> See SID et al (2006) *Report of the national conference on equity and growth: Towards a policy agenda for Kenya*



### Core beats and mainstreaming

One approach is to encourage and support journalists to make poverty reduction part of the subjects they already have to cover as key ‘beats’.

One such beat is politics. Admittedly, mainstreaming poverty in coverage of this subject is not straightforward in terms of its nationwide applicability as an approach. Feedback from journalists attending Panos workshops, for example, indicates that it may be more effective for capital-based editors and journalists, who perceive their audiences as wanting political stories, rather than for locally-based journalists traditionally more concerned with covering social development issues such as poverty.<sup>80</sup>

Mainstreaming, as well as begging the question of whether local media coverage of poverty reduction could be given a sharper policy focus and linked more strongly with national political issues, will require capital-based editors and journalists to consider adopting a wider and more open approach to their political coverage, given dominant reporting styles. Charles Mwanguhya Mpagi from Uganda’s *Daily Monitor* says that the media concentrate on elite politics and political figures, so while building in a focus on the politics of poverty reduction might be possible, it will also be a challenge. Efforts to interest journalists, editors and media owners in this approach will need to show in practice how it could be part of stronger, better-quality public interest reporting of national politics.

Making poverty reduction part of a wider approach to political coverage would require a more analytical and investigative approach, with journalists being less accepting of set-piece statements and formal positions from all actors seeking to shape policy. But there are strong opportunities. For example, human rights and governance issues – particularly corruption – are not just relevant to poverty reduction but of wider concern to both media and public.

**‘There is a huge market for holding the government to account if it is done well. For example, corruption stories can be made more interesting if the amount pocketed can be set in terms of how many children won’t go to school or how much road remains unpaved.’**

**Abdulahi Bori**, journalist, Uganda Radio Network, February 2007

And as part of concern with governance, crime and public security issues feature in some PRSPs, as in Kenya, so there may be opportunities for promoting a stronger poverty focus in media coverage of these subjects. Indeed, they are part of a key media ‘beat’ and of potential interest to a wide range of audiences. But to explore crime-poverty links well, argues Kenyan social scientist James Maende, the media would need to take a more analytical approach than he feels they do at present, drawing on research and the effective support of researchers involved in this area.

Parliamentary reporting is another media staple. Policy actors such as CSOs or parliamentarians could bring to the media’s attention tip of the iceberg examples of how developments, policies and decisions in this area affect the people they seek to represent, particularly if they are already a matter of topical interest for the media.

Meanwhile, poverty reduction could also be integrated into existing reporting of business and economics, given their vital bearing on countries’ national development prospects. The challenge here, as such reporting is typically oriented to business leaders and more ‘technical’ policymakers, is to encourage a stronger focus on the relevance of the policy issues at stake for the wider public and poor people in particular.<sup>81</sup>

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Panos Eastern Africa, for example, reports that its work with the Ugandan media to stimulate communication and debate on poverty reduction was more successful in volume and impact with locally-based media outlets than with the Kampala-based national media

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For discussion of this challenge in the case of international trade, see Panos London’s 2006 working paper (as note 57) and the panel debate held by Panos London at the WTO in 2006 with journalists from Reuters and Africa (see note 53)

**‘When policies on international trade are related to local issues, they become very interesting. Trade creates employment and investment and can affect diplomatic relations, so it’s an important issue for the *New Nation* to cover. It’s as a result of decisions on trade that nations like Bangladesh progress or perish.’**

Mustafa Kamal Majumder, editor of the *New Nation*,  
Bangladesh, 17 April 2007

Policy actors can do much to help the media take this approach, based on the key issues and possible stories arising from their daily experience. CSOs are active on the social effects of economic policies and business activity. Governments and international institutions say they are supporting ‘pro-poor’ growth policies and programmes. They can all benefit from working with the media. Government officials, for example, may find that it can help them explain their positions and decisions to the public, or get their message across when they are involved in negotiations of international trade and investment agreements.

### **Importance of the human angle and inclusion of ‘voice’**

It is also important to highlight the human dimensions of policy decision-making and implementation. This is particularly true when it comes to the media covering PRSPs or national development plans. While more could be done to promote media interest in the politics of decision-making, narrow descriptive coverage of the institutional mechanics of PRSP processes is only likely to interest select audiences. Focusing on people brings out more vividly the issues for the public and their consequences for poor people. It can also help bring to life accountability questions – whether, how and to what extent government and international donor policies are likely to be beneficial or damaging.

This is particularly important in the case of complex economic policy decisions, which, while ostensibly technical, often involve heated political debate and affect the daily lives of poor people. As policy specialist Rashida Dohad of the Asia Foundation in Pakistan says: ‘Covering high inflation and its impact on household expenditure might be more effective than concentrating on the somewhat arid and abstract issue of how the PRSP relates to the MTEF [Medium Term Expenditure Framework].’

**‘We [journalists] must localise the stories by giving them a human face. We have to learn that poverty is real. It is not about statistics. It is about people, living, walking and surviving. It is these people we have to report about... telling [readers] about what is happening in a world they do not know.’**

John Kamau, journalist, Kenya<sup>82</sup>

The human interest angle is also vital because it helps bring into relief the complex, multi-dimensional nature of poverty that is a challenge for journalists to write about. Some editors suggest that, to attract audiences, human stories on the harsh realities of poverty must bring in new insights and angles. These might include features that cover positive changes in people’s lives as well as hard-hitting accounts of struggles against deprivation – for example, a street child who transforms his life and gets off the streets.

“...the key journalistic skills needed... are in many ways no different from those required to cover any other complex topic.”

In Pakistan, *The News*, under the editorship of Fahd Husain, carried a daily column on the lives and experiences of poorer people, and this approach was also adopted by *The Daily Times*. Fahd Husain says these stories, as well as being fascinating in themselves, often led the reader to think about the wider issues. *The News* hired a journalist to work exclusively on stories for this column.

Some journalists argue that while stories on poverty reduction may often be features, coverage of the issue should ideally include more news items, using pictures where possible to convey the issues. Going a step further, Uganda's *Daily Monitor* regularly has front-page editorials which focus on poverty-related issues and are intended to raise debate.

In striving to include stronger human angles in their stories, the media could be encouraged by CSOs involved in grassroots community development and local advocacy to take advantage of the communication methods that they and communities use to provide an outlet for poor people's views.

For example, Panos has found that oral testimonies can not only be a powerful vehicle for communication by poor people themselves, but also sensitise the media and provide valuable information that journalists can use to considerable effect in stories. Indeed, media coverage of issues revealed in testimonies can amplify poor people's voices, maximising their potential for wider impact outside the communities, for example, among local power-holders and national policymakers (see Appendix 1, 'Non-media communication, journalists and amplifying poor people's voices', giving an account of use of Panos-supported oral testimonies by community radio in Ghana and the mainstream mass media in Pakistan).

### Media leadership and developing professional expertise

For poverty reduction to become a greater part of routine reporting on subjects like politics and economics, journalists may need more time and space to develop and maintain specific knowledge of the issues, debates and links. But as far as training is concerned, the key journalistic skills needed – critical analysis, cultivating contacts, identifying sources of information, bringing out the public interest angle – are in many ways no different from those required to cover any other complex topic.

There is therefore no reason why development of such skills and their application to poverty reduction coverage should be an excessive burden. The issue is less to do with the specific training on this subject, than on the level and quality of training generally available to journalists in the media sector. It is a question of whether media houses, official institutions dealing with the media and donor organisations are prepared to invest in strengthening journalism training both within and outside the industry (for example, in the education system).

As part of stronger knowledge development and training support, journalists might benefit from expertise on:

- the key actors in poverty reduction efforts and debates
- how best to work with these different actors
- the range of institutions and policy processes relevant to poverty reduction – so the media can scrutinise their transparency, openness and accountability
- how to package poverty-related stories to make them newsworthy, including as part of coverage of mainstream topics – ie, demonstrating their public interest implications and highlighting the human angle, including people's voices and views
- linkages between domestic policymaking and the role of international actors.

Providing good, reliable information to explain or illustrate a dramatic topical story will not only be appreciated by good journalists, but can also do much to sustain their interest and commitment after the event. »

### Individual motivation

The value and impact of developing such expertise are also maximised when they are accompanied by vision and passion on the part of editors and reporters. It is often these qualities that have driven individual journalists to produce stories about poverty issues, especially when professional support has not been forthcoming.

Such commitment is often valued by those outside the media involved in efforts to combat poverty. As Ivy Mutwale from Zambia's CSPR network puts it: 'Zeal and passion are vital. If a journalist has these they will always find a way to bring the issues out in a story... What is important is that a journalist can empathise with the people about the impacts of poverty on their lives.' Indeed, the ability to empathise is essential to journalists bringing out the human interest in poverty-related stories.

It is also often journalists' ability to transmit their passion to editors – for example, by setting out the possible stories stemming from a well-organised and potentially newsworthy visit to a local community – that gets their stories published. CSO and community leaders can help journalists by providing good quotes and interviews. Providing good, reliable information to explain or illustrate a dramatic topical story will not only be appreciated by good journalists, but can also do much to sustain their interest and commitment after the event.

Ivy Mutwale thinks that CSOs working on poverty can nurture motivation among reporters, and that this has already led to greater media tenacity in their approach and tactics. Zambia's *The Post*, for example, she said, had carried an in-depth analysis of the latest budget, which looked at proposed poverty-alleviating expenditures and their potential impacts on the poor, and compared these with funds budgeted to be spent on the presidential State House.

Leaders of organisations trying to shape or influence policies such as CSOs and research bodies should also cultivate links with targeted editors. For example, they could invite editors to key events, or brief them informally on key forthcoming initiatives and developments. But they need to bear in mind that it will be easier and more productive to involve editors if they have clearly thought out issues for discussion with them and in which editors might have a specific interest and strategic stake. CSO leaders, from their own policy work and contacts, can have their own privileged insights, contacts and sources of information, and these can be of considerable interest to editors. This contact with editors is important, as those already with access, such as prominent politicians, business leaders and top government officials and policymakers, are aware.

Visionary and inspiring editors are more willing and likely to support proactive reporters, and will be able to help them think critically, look for new and innovative ways to present stories, and prioritise topics.



### Passion and initiative get results

Suleiman Mustapha Dauda is chief business reporter for the *Statesman*, Ghana's oldest newspaper. His passion, however, is writing about access to government services and he believes that the media have an important function to play in informing the government about realities on the ground.

He wrote a story in early 2007 on the pollution of villagers' drinking water by a gold mining company. He used his mobile phone to take photographs of the sludgy, orange polluted water the people were expected to drink, and although the story was on page 7, a colour photograph on the front page ensured it had considerable impact. It was also picked up by radio news programmes. Suleiman claims that soon after his story broke, government officials in Accra were on the telephone to the District Assembly; new bore holes were dug and the villagers had safe drinking water again.

As a result of his initiative, Suleiman says his editor takes a keener interest in his story ideas. He says his editor supports his work and would be willing to provide greater resources for him to do more if the paper was earning more revenue.

### Targeting and extending key audiences

If the media in low-income countries are to set the agenda on key public policy issues such as poverty reduction, editors and reporters need to pitch their stories to engage the interest and concern of key audiences at different levels.<sup>83</sup> In a competitive media sector, they need to know which stories can tap new public audiences and expand existing ones. Policy actors keen to interest the media must consider carefully the audiences that editors and journalists might have in mind.

Public interest stories involving stronger reporting and analytical comment on the policy issues at stake may be the most effective way of reaching specific political audiences, while human interest stories may on the whole be more likely to appeal to the general public. Even so, dramatic individual stories illustrating a wider issue that connects with the public mind have often provoked reactions at the highest policymaking levels. And the media at different levels could be encouraged to cover national political issues relevant to poverty reduction in ways that make them accessible to wider audiences.

Policy actors should consider their audience before deciding which form of media to target. For example, youth is a big audience in Uganda with 50 per cent of the population under 18 years old and should clearly be a target for raising awareness of poverty issues. However, newspaper readership is low among this age group, so it may be better to use communication vehicles they feel belong to them – popular music programmes, soap operas, radio or TV dramas. Radio pieces with an entertainment/drama format rather than discussion or current affairs would also be effective, and more commercially viable for private FM radio.<sup>84</sup>

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As well as targeting the general public, the media may have very specific audiences in mind at each level. For example, nationally, key audiences of the capital-based media might be government and opposition leaders and supporters, official decision-makers and policy implementers within government and the state, the international diplomatic community (including donor representatives), political parties and parliamentarians, business leaders, non-governmental policy organisations and so on. Such target audiences may have links with counterparts and other organisations and groups outside the capital, which, as well as wishing to publicise their views nationally, use locally-based media to address their own constituents, members and audiences at a district, provincial or grassroots level. One challenge is how to ensure a more fluid supply and exchange of accessible information relevant to audiences at different levels (coverage of key national issues for local audiences and, crucially, coverage of key local stories that merit national attention)

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Comments made by participants at Panos South Asia's national roundtable on the media and poverty reduction, 21 July 2005, Islamabad, Pakistan



While Hyderabad, India, enjoys economic growth, attracting software and call centre businesses, the construction workers and security guards employed in the development of the city's luxury housing live in slum conditions. This disparity could be a story worth reporting.

CHRIS STOWERS | PANOS PICTURES



*The media sector's priority as an agent of change within the "development debate" is surprisingly undervalued by the international community... Support for strengthening media is a 'blind spot' for the majority of development agencies... The media's contributing role to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals needs to be given higher priority. »*

### Time for strategic support for the media as a public good

Some observers strongly question the extent to which the media's potential as an essential force for development has been recognised, for example, the African Media Development Initiative, a research initiative stemming from the UK-government sponsored Commission for Africa in 2005. 'The media sector's priority as an agent of change within the "development debate" is surprisingly undervalued by the international community... Support for strengthening media is a 'blind spot' for the majority of development agencies... The media's contributing role to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals needs to be given higher priority.'<sup>85</sup>

But there are incipient signs that international donors and CSOs are beginning to pay more attention to the strategic role of communication – and the potential of the media – in supporting development, as witnessed by the World Congress of Communication for Development organised by the World Bank and others in Rome in October 2006<sup>86</sup> and the World Bank conference on communication and poverty reduction held that year at the OECD (see page 21)

High-level interest of this kind from within donor institutions and elsewhere internationally is welcome. But as noted earlier, potential interest in targeting work with the media will be less effective if it fails properly to acknowledge the media's prevailing commercial realities and serious practical challenges.

Unlike the development community, the bottom-line imperative of much of the mainstream mass media is commercial survival and profit as part of an industry, not social goals. At the same time, stronger coverage of key public affairs issues such as poverty reduction should be regarded as a public good to be nurtured within a vibrant media sector. But this means that those outside the profession who want editors and reporters to contribute independently to development change through stronger public service and public interest reporting must help address the media's own support needs as an urgent prerequisite. Such an approach would also be more likely to win media support and ownership. But neither the intrinsic development value of such reporting nor the need for strategies to provide practical support is properly recognised at present.

### Towards structural solutions?

Stronger leadership from within the media sector itself is fundamental to such progress, as noted by Bangladesh newspaper editor, Mahfuz Anan, who argued that media owners, managers and editors should make corporate social responsibility a core objective, in support of the media's public duties and their own business interests. At the same time, the range of constraints and challenges facing the media is so extensive that structural proposals and solutions need to be considered as well.

A positive development in recent years in many parts of Africa and South Asia has been the gradual easing of state controls on the media, which has led to greater media pluralism. Even where the process has been more difficult, a climate often exists in which states and governments may find it more difficult or costly to contain the pressures for media freedoms. A more independent media sector has been emerging in Pakistan, for example, despite continued restrictions – a fundamental part of changing social relations and intense political debates in the country.

However, media liberalisation has been accompanied by growing commercialisation that critics claim is often driving down diversity of coverage, quality of media content and professional standards. This process has occurred in a vacuum in which proper public policies and legislation to oversee development of the different parts of the mainstream mass media and the media sector as a whole have been absent, fragmentary or ad hoc.

<sup>85</sup> African Media Development Initiative, as note 50, p11

<sup>86</sup> For further information and recommendations, see World Congress on Communication for Development (2007), *The Rome Consensus: Communication for Development – A Major Pillar for Development and Change*, [www.devcomm.org/devcomm/Outcomes/TheRomeConsensus/tabid/250/Default.aspx?macrolid=15&microlid=1501](http://www.devcomm.org/devcomm/Outcomes/TheRomeConsensus/tabid/250/Default.aspx?macrolid=15&microlid=1501)

<sup>87</sup> See *At the heart of change* (2007), as note 2, for fuller elaborations of Panos London's reflections and recommendations on the case for communication in sustainable development, including the vital need to support media development

The time has come for a strategic approach to media-related public policy goals, such as:

- putting in place a supportive legal framework – for example, freedom of expression and information legislation, reforming inappropriate defamation and libel laws
- establishing a stronger public service remit for public broadcasters
- introducing stronger systems for media financing
- protecting and promoting the complementary contributions of the public and private media as well as community and alternative media
- strengthening all relevant media institutions, including appropriate regulatory regimes to tackle problems such as concentration of media ownership and to promote fair competition.

Full and proper elaboration of possible media reform proposals is beyond the scope of this report, and the task transcends the specific issue of poverty reduction.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, it should be seen as a central task, given the strategic value of media and communication for public engagement in poverty reduction as a major area of public policy.<sup>89</sup>

Alongside strategies to strengthen codes and systems to promote high professional media standards, another key priority is commitment to invest in high-quality journalism training.

### **A force for effective citizenship and governance**

The fundamental underlying challenge is the media's overall financial sustainability. Without clear public policy approaches to address this, it is questionable whether the different parts of the media, left exclusively to the commercial pressures of the market or the dwindling largesse of the state, will be able to offer the vibrant public service and public interest roles that this report has argued all policy actors should value, support and exploit.

Given the legacy of state media controls (and their retention in some cases), the challenge of nurturing effective media-related public policies and institutions is intimately linked with improved governance, as any positive changes would need to ensure media independence and safeguard public broadcasters and licensing authorities from illegitimate political interference. Conversely, if the media's public service and public interest roles are to be protected and extended, public policies ought to consider them a tool of public citizenship and not another consumer market to be left solely to the unchannelled currents of commercial forces. These can also compromise the media.

In view of international donors' and international NGOs' attention to governance, it seems remiss that they have paid so little attention to the media's potential in this area – particularly as a tool for scrutiny and ensuring the accountability of all actors. For example, it would appear to be counterproductive to support CSOs to advocate stronger accountability mechanisms and press governments to improve their governance and transparency, without supporting the media, through which civil society groups can communicate their findings and proposals and more effectively hold official institutions to account. The same holds for the ability of national official institutions, with public support, to act in the public interest by providing checks and balances on executive power and by holding powerful non-state actors to account. The media's scrutiny role, while independent of government, can be vital to encouraging or ensuring the effective functioning of the systems and bodies involved in public interest regulation and oversight of decision-making.

Because the media sector is heterogeneous, interventions to support it, including financing strategies, need to be carefully targeted. Proposals must

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An outline of the key media development priorities for Panos London can be found in *At the heart of change* (2007), as note 2. These are the need to: establish media freedom and an enabling and supportive regulatory environment; support the development of media infrastructure and long-term sustainability; build media capacity and professionalism; and support improvement in the quality and diversity of media content. The 'Conclusions and recommendations' section below takes these up from the point of view of their relevance to poverty reduction

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One could also argue that the media and communication should be treated as a distinct sector for stronger consideration in PRSPs and NDPs, not least in the context of the latter's growing emphasis on governance and the quality of decision-making, as well as on the productive economy in which the sharing of information and knowledge is vital. Newer PRSPs and NDPs sometimes consider information communication technologies to be part of their remit, but far too often this would seem to be from a narrow technical perspective



also consider such needs in relation to the media sector as a whole; community or alternative media have an equally valid role to play as the mainstream public or private commercial mass media.

### Building on initiatives and investing in sustainability

Despite the absence of a more strategic approach to media development and media policies, numerous initiatives are already underway. Some examples include:

- **Ghana:** The Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN), in conjunction with a broad-based platform of civil society groups, is putting together a broadcasting bill which among other things will address the allocation of airwaves, define the function of the public broadcaster as a public interest institution, and establish a regulatory regime. The GCRN hopes that by defining the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation's public interest function, the latter can develop more synergistic relationships with community radio stations and other parts of the media. The drafting of the bill has been informed by nationwide consultations with a range of stakeholders, including operators from the three broadcasting sectors and communities served by community radio.
- **Uganda:** Mentored by Panos Eastern Africa and with financial support from European bilateral donors, journalists in Uganda have set up their own regulatory body – the Independent Media Council – which is registered both as an NGO and a private limited company.
- **Zambia:** A coalition of journalists has put together a Freedom of Information Act, which is being considered by parliament.
- **Ghana:** Journalists have explored establishing a press corps to syndicate poverty-related and other stories serving the public interest.

But in the absence of more structural approaches to media development, many initiatives run the risk of being piecemeal and unsustainable in the long term.

One international donor assisted Suleiman Mustapha Dauda of the *Statesman* in Ghana to set up a journalist group to report on HIV, providing journalists with resources to cover their expenses while researching stories. The articles were then distributed to other journalists around the country for their use. The project was successful until the small pot of money ran out. Suleiman continues to cover the stories himself as a sideline to his job as chief business reporter. However, he feels that he cannot ask the other journalists in the group to follow stories without resources, so the group has effectively folded.

While even small amounts of money can significantly help to support and train journalists to play a public interest role, Suleiman's story underlines the fact that donors' tendency to fund one-off projects is only of short-term value. Despite their immediate success, sources of sustained finance and the establishment of sustainable mechanisms of finance for the media are lacking. Community-level radio stations particularly struggle to keep afloat financially on their small advertising markets. They need financial support to purchase basic equipment and provide training for their staff.

While donors and international NGOs have occasionally been willing to provide project finance to fund such initiatives, the former particularly could also focus on supporting the media sector to establish new institutions, such as press syndicates which report on particular issues; and they could provide support to governments and media support bodies to help them develop professional training and standards, regulations and regulatory mechanisms, media policies and enabling legislation.

# Conclusion and recommendations

To catalyse wider debate on the subject, this report has presented a complex and challenging picture of the media in low-income countries and the potential of relevant parts of the sector to make their own distinct contribution to efforts to reduce poverty. It has highlighted the importance of all policy actors not only recognising this potential and strengthening their engagement with individual journalists, but also supporting the media more effectively.<sup>90</sup> However, the constraints and challenges facing the media are so considerable that key stakeholders will need to make their own individual contributions to solutions and coordinate where necessary joint responses. The overall priorities for the main actors are as follows:

- **Civil society** and the media should strive to overcome misunderstandings and differences in professional approach in order to exploit the multiple benefits that both sides could derive from stronger interaction. While the media has much to do to address their own challenges, both national CSOs and the international NGOs could do much to strengthen their approach to engaging and working with the media as independent partners.
- **Governments** in low-income countries, as well as making the media and communication a strategic part of boosting public participation in changing poverty reduction strategies and national development plans, should strengthen their media relations capacity. They should see the public service and public interest roles of the media as a vital requirement of stronger national decision-making, and provide practical incentives – such as supportive institutions, policies and legislation – for journalists to perform these roles in the interests of good governance. Governments, with the support of partners, should enable the development of independent media institutions and frameworks, and promote strategic public policies for the media, in pursuit of structural solutions for the challenges raised by this report.
- **International donors** should help efforts to provide an enabling environment for strengthening the media's public service and public interest roles by supporting relevant actors and partners to develop and promote effective national media policies and media support strategies. But first, they will need to encourage and prompt their own governments and the donor community generally to recognise not only the value of the media's independent role in relation to development issues such as poverty reduction but also address the sector's support needs. They should make support for media and communication a stronger, integral part of international aid.
- **Media leaders** and media support organisations could exploit opportunities for making stronger public interest coverage of issues relevant to poverty reduction a key feature of mainstream reporting. To this end, they should support journalists to develop their range of knowledge, skills and contacts. Media leaders and organisations can also promote their own proposals for the strategic reforms and solutions needed to support the media's public service and public interest roles as an essential requirement of stronger coverage of issues such as poverty reduction. Solutions might include media training, audience research and strengthening the quality of media content.

Specific recommendations for the key actors above to engage the media and support stronger public service and public interest coverage of poverty reduction include the following:

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As recognised in the introduction, this report is the result of a pilot initiative and further research is needed on this challenge. An important general recommendation, therefore, is that all actors, both non-media and media, should provide feedback to Panos London on the report's findings and recommendations

### National civil society organisations can:

- Develop effective ways to make the most of the media as a vital communication interface between governments, donors and the public on key issues relevant to poverty reduction, with a view to ensuring civil society perspectives are taken into account in coverage alongside those of influential policy actors.
- Make appropriate media outlets a key target audience in their information-gathering, dissemination and communication strategies, including advocacy initiatives and public campaigns, based on clear aims and objectives
- identify which parts of the media and which editors and journalists to target, making new contacts but also focusing on those with a strong interest and track record in covering issues relevant to poverty reduction
- take time and effort to develop personal relationships with journalists – and, where possible, editors – highlighting the public interest significance of the issues CSOs work on and their relevance to media audiences
- inform journalists about the issues they work on, taking them to meet directly the grassroots organisations, communities and people they work with, having first identified key issues for the media and concrete story ideas requiring media research.
- Strengthen the systems and activities needed to attract and inform the media, sustain their interest, and help individual journalists cover stories effectively
- ensure that public meetings and events are well organised and media-friendly
- improve the presentation, quality and media relevance of briefing materials, where necessary learning how to package information to meet journalists' needs
- sharpen policy messages to attract the media, ensuring that information and analysis are factually accurate, credible and well argued.
- Take time to find out and understand in greater detail how the media operates in practice and what journalists' specific information needs are
- recognise the pressures of editorial space and deadlines, and their need to verify information and cover different viewpoints
- recognise the need for proposed story ideas to meet media values such as topicality and newsworthiness, noting that stories that stand in their own right are more likely – especially in the longer term – to be effective in sustaining the meaningful interest of good journalists and editors and of public audiences in comparison with media coverage that is paid for.
- Exploit the media's political and mass public reach by linking mainstream and alternative media journalists with CSOs' support for the efforts of poor communities to communicate and promote their own views locally and nationally.
- Help journalists to demystify complex issues and processes for the public by providing media-friendly versions of key government reports, documents/ initiatives, avoiding jargon and explaining technical terminology.
- Get involved in and contribute to relevant discussions of public policies on the media.

### International NGOs can:

- Recognise the value of the media's potential in low-income countries to stimulate inclusive public debate on poverty reduction issues by making work with the media a dimension of their own communication and advocacy on PRSPs and of their work in this area with local and national CSO partners
- develop strategies for providing stronger support for CSO partners working at different levels in low-income countries to strengthen their communications capacity on poverty reduction issues
- provide practical resources, advice and support, including training, to help partners develop their media relations skills and expertise
- provide sustained funding for pro-development media organisations and institutions.
- Explore partnerships, as appropriate, with media support organisations helping relevant parts of the media to address their own needs, in recognition of the constraints facing fulfilment of the media's public service and public interest roles.
- Launch and fund research initiatives, by bodies concerned with media development, to explore the views of media leaders, editors and journalists on the challenges and opportunities raised by this report.

### National governments can:

- Introduce where necessary or strengthen as appropriate communication strategies to boost public awareness at all levels of policies and strategies relevant to poverty reduction. This means coordinating the involvement of all official stakeholders and non-state actors to ensure that policy design and implementation includes effective information exchange and iterative public debate geared to the greater and deeper participation of poor people, in particular:
- develop public information and consultation systems, strengthening a participatory focus on poverty as governments develop their own home-grown strategies and national development plans
- invite and support the independent involvement of all parts of the media – both the traditional mass media and the alternative media (such as community radio) – as an integral feature of communication strategies. Implementation of such strategies, in the context of decentralisation reforms, should address the information needs of local journalists and communicators
- strengthen, as an integral feature of institutional reforms, the capacity of individual ministries and government departments to prepare and implement effective communication strategies, including systems to collect, collate, store and disseminate data/information relevant to poverty reduction
- develop stronger systems and practices to handle media relations, including agile ways of dealing with journalists' enquiries and questions, regular briefings and press conferences, electronic newsletters, and creating and updating specific pages on poverty reduction on official websites
- involve the media in helping to communicate the findings of official surveys and research exercises on poverty and poverty reduction, also bringing journalists into closer contact with poor people



- engage the media to provide stronger coverage of key moments in official policymaking and decision-making such as national budgeting, donor loans or the development of strategies to promote economic growth and good governance.
- Encourage the media, in the context of governance reforms, to scrutinise the quality and effectiveness of national and international decision-making on poverty reduction
- provide practical and political incentives for media scrutiny of official decision-making by establishing and supporting in practice effective, independent and transparent governance mechanisms, for example, audit offices and committees
- engage the media in efforts to boost the capacity of parliaments, oversight bodies and independent public interest institutions fairly and transparently to hold all actors – national or foreign, public or private – to account for their performance and practices.
- Explore and support the development of coherent and effective public policies on the media to protect and promote their vital public service and public interest roles,<sup>91</sup> with the participation of both media and relevant non-media stakeholders and partners, so as to:
  - develop policy proposals and introduce supportive legislation (such as freedom of expression and freedom of information laws, as well as reforms of libel and defamation laws so they are transparent, consistent and fair)
  - help strengthen all institutions relevant to effective media support (journalism training, media management, professional associations and unions)
  - enable the development of independent media regulation and media support systems, in pursuit of effective public service remits, equitable licensing arrangements, stronger media financing mechanisms, and public support for high-quality public interest media content
  - support independent media regulation institutions so that they can enhance the complementary contributions of the public, private and alternative media and promote fair competition, addressing problems posed by concentration of media markets or the challenges faced by small media actors.
- Consider the media sector and public communication as public goods to be nurtured in the development of PRSPs and national development plans, alongside growing consideration of information and communication technologies in such documents.

#### **Official international donor institutions can:**

- Promote stronger recognition within the donor community of the value of a vibrant media sector in low-income countries in the global fight against poverty, through its independent contribution as a mass-reach provider of information and a forum for more inclusive public debate
- act on this recognition by encouraging individual donor governments to make media support and media engagement strategic priorities in overall official donor support for poverty reduction strategies (including as part of the communication strategies needed to boost public participation) and in relevant programmes with non-state policy actors

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These and other points below draw considerably on the more extensive list of media development proposals contained in Panos London (2007) *At the heart of change*, as note 2

- advocate the mainstream integration of media and communication in all donor programmes and policies relevant to poverty reduction, in the context of the OECD's Paris Declaration of 2005 on the effectiveness and harmonisation of international aid.<sup>92</sup>
- Make recognition of the media's independent scrutiny role a key feature of support for governance reforms implemented with government and civil society support in low-income countries, encouraging and supporting all national efforts to promote effective institutions that provide strong practical and political incentives for media involvement.
- Acknowledge, as a prerequisite for the media's potential to be realised, the sector's own structural development needs, providing and helping to leverage all necessary practical support, technical advice and research in proper consultation and partnership with relevant stakeholders and partners, focused on strengthening the media's public service and public interest roles
- support governments and all relevant national stakeholders and partners to develop stronger public policies on the media (see above)
- help support the provision of stronger training programmes for journalists, particularly local journalists
- provide more sustained funding, particularly core funding, for pro-development media organisations and for institutions that support the development of the media as a sector.

#### **Media leaders and media support organisations can:**

- Exploit the opportunities for making stronger public interest coverage of issues relevant to poverty reduction an integral part of key media reporting interests (such as politics, business and economics, coverage of parliaments and budgets, governance, corruption, crime).
- Provide professional incentives and practical support for editors and journalists to undertake topical story research and develop the knowledge, critical skills and journalistic expertise needed to strengthen public interest coverage of issues relevant to poverty reduction.
- Take advantage of the increased range of actors and organisations producing information relevant to poverty reduction policy issues, encouraging journalists to diversify their information sources and contacts beyond state and government institutions and include civil society organisations at different levels, policy research bodies and parliamentarians.
- Work with governments, international donors and media support organisations to secure strategic support for stronger journalist training, as well as the financing of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of media content on key public policy issues such as poverty reduction.
- Work with editors to assess existing information and discuss their views of different public audiences' interests in coverage of issues of topical relevance to poverty reduction, where necessary considering specific public surveys and securing advice and resources from national and international support institutions.
- Consider and develop strategic policy proposals for the media, whether led from within the sector or as part of advocacy of stronger public policies on the media, pressing governments for appropriate independent regulatory frameworks and supportive media laws and reforms.

<sup>92</sup> The OECD's 2005 'Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness: Ownership, Harmonisation, Alignment, Results and Mutual Accountability' can be seen at [www.oecd.org/document/18/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_35401554\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,2340,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html)

- Develop specific media development proposals relevant to public interest coverage of public policy issues such as poverty reduction, presenting them to governments, donors and outside media support organisations as they introduce initiatives and finance programmes aimed at stronger policies and practical support for the sector.

# Appendix I

## Non-media communication, journalists and amplifying poor people's voices



As we saw in the first section, 'Setting the scene, making the case', relatively weak involvement of local communities in PRSPs is one of their alleged shortcomings, and stronger participation is vital to the success of any strategies for reducing poverty, whether through stronger PRSPs or any other future policy frameworks. The media, including the mainstream mass media and particularly alternative community media, along with other forms of communication (such as community theatre), have a vital role to play in finding solutions to this problem. But if the principles of participation and ownership are to have meaning, poor people have to communicate on their own terms and through means they consider their own.

Oral testimony is a method that allows people who are marginalised – through illiteracy, poverty, gender, disability, caste, religion or ethnic identity – to communicate their views in unstructured, informal, open-ended, in-depth interviews. These are usually carried out on a one-to-one basis, recorded and then transcribed or aired word-for-word, which means that people's stories are told in their own voices. The way the testimonies are gathered is as important as the testimonies themselves.

Oral testimonies are a powerful vehicle for communication by poor people and can also help to sensitise the media, policy actors and power-holders outside of communities. In turn, media coverage of issues revealed in testimonies can act as a powerful force to amplify poor people's voices and maximise their potential for wider impact.

### The power of oral testimonies and media sensitisation

While development interventions are often based on a sector approach (for example, health), there are no such neat divisions in people's lives. Because of the focus on the individual – rather than particular development themes – an oral testimony interview can reveal the often hidden connections between different aspects of people's lives. 'Narrators' are asked about their past experiences and their hopes for the future as well as the current situation, providing a long-term view that can provide a deeper understanding of change.

This is particularly important if policymakers are to understand the complexity of poverty and, in the case of journalists, report on the challenge of poverty reduction. Indeed, the concept of poverty is often treated as a technical issue, an approach which official poverty reduction goals and targets, though vital, may risk accentuating. Oral testimonies on the other hand, are vivid, personal and direct, and bring home to the reader or listener the reality and experience of poverty. This can have a powerful effect on audiences and be a powerful resource for community-based and mainstream media.

Panos and its partners have usually trained community members as interviewers in oral testimony workshops – often staff of local organisations. But we have now also sought to bring interested and committed journalists into direct contact with poor people and their organisations, to sensitise them and give them access to material that could powerfully engage their audiences.

By involving journalists in oral testimony training and gathering testimonies from marginalised people in five countries, Panos has opened their eyes to the possibilities of new approaches. The very personal experience of oral testimony gathering often significantly alters the way in which journalists think about poverty, giving them stronger insights on the subject, and new angles, sources and story ideas they can use in their mainstream professional work.

The People's Assembly at Manchar Lake, Pakistan.

PANOS PAKISTAN



### Challenging voices, challenging journalists in Pakistan

**Sahar Ali**, Panos South Asia's country representative in Pakistan, describes how involving journalists in gathering oral testimonies in Pakistan has helped them question traditional approaches to reporting on poverty reduction. These, she says, tend to take existing power relations in society as their main reference point.

Zia Qureshi, a reporter for *Ibrat*, a daily Sindhi-language newspaper, had just interviewed impoverished urban slum dwellers in Sanghar, an industrial town in Sindh – Pakistan's second-most populous, but in many ways least developed, region. His excited tone spoke volumes, standing in stark contrast with the flat rhythms of traditional reporting on poverty in Pakistan where 'statement journalism' is too frequently the norm. Newspapers are filled with what VIPs have to say, and deference to their status is often an implicit feature of reports covering their views. The voices of ordinary people are seldom, if ever, heard.

The media are said to be a bridge between the 'governors' and the 'governed', but in Pakistan the bridge tends to be one way: offering the official perspective, but neglecting what people feel about decisions being made and the effect such decisions have on their lives.

Oral testimonies can help 'humanise' and redress the balance of poverty coverage, bringing in angles missing in statements and statistics parading as news for and about the poor. Training in oral testimony collection can give reporters new insights into interviewing. Panos aimed to help journalists breathe much-needed life into the country's media reporting – to include poor people's views, and not just rely on official statistics and statements. Involving journalists, as well as community members, in gathering oral testimonies was a new experience, and has had a powerful effect. While journalists found ready-to-use stories, the voices of the poor found direct and immediate access to the public via newspaper reports and television programmes.

### Adding to the drama, widening the impact: oral testimonies and the media

By providing deeper insights into people's experiences of poverty, oral testimonies can increase understanding of poverty issues, and could help shape public attitudes and inform decision-making at different levels. However, to achieve this wider impact, they need to be promoted through specific communication and media strategies.

Panos and its partners have sought to widen the reach and impact of oral testimonies by using non-media communication tools such as community theatre to stimulate public debate of the issues they raise, and by encouraging different media – such as television, radio and newspapers – to use them as a rich source of information for stories and programmes.

### Ghana: a community channel

Working with community radio has proved effective. For example, in 2006 Panos West Africa worked with journalists from five stations belonging to the Ghana Radio Community Network (GRCN) to turn the oral testimonies they had gathered into short radio programmes. These covered poverty-related topics as diverse as the national health insurance scheme, sending children away to work, early pregnancy, and micro-credit schemes. The programmes not only stimulated public debate – for instance, about teenage pregnancy – but also prompted listeners to establish support and self-help groups and to take action.<sup>93</sup>

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For example, according to a Panos West Africa evaluation report in 2006, as a result of the awareness raised by these radio programmes, two women obtained a local government loan to expand their small brewing business; a shoemaker helped organise a shoemakers' cooperative; many people registered with the national health insurance scheme for the first time; one person reported migrant child labour to the local authorities. There were also official repercussions: a National AIDS Commission official contacted the radio station to follow up something he had heard on the programme; a regional minister contacted a station manager to ask why officials had not been invited to speak

While oral testimonies provide a communication vehicle for poor people's voices, it is also important to generate debate at local, regional and if possible, national levels, amplifying them to make sure they are heard by policymakers and the general public. The most effective way of doing this is through the mainstream media.

### Pakistan: a platform for the people

In Pakistan, innovative collaboration between community-based organisations and the media combined non-media communication activities and mainstream media coverage to use and promote oral testimonies. Panos South Asia worked with the Interactive Resources Centre (IRC)<sup>94</sup> to turn the oral testimonies that the journalists supported by Panos had gathered in 2005 into a two-part drama about the destructive impact of environmental degradation on the livelihoods of fisherfolk and farmers around Manchar Lake in Sindh province.<sup>95</sup> The play was performed at a theatre festival, and then at a people's assembly supported by Panos and the NGO Shirkat Gah in Manchar in January 2007, where it formed the basis of a public debate on the issues affecting people's lives. The assembly brought together more than 1,200 people,<sup>96</sup> including community members, district-level government representatives, local politicians and landlords.

As well as giving marginalised people a sense of empowerment by having their issues dramatised and debated in a wider public setting attended by outsiders, the assembly's power was enhanced by the deliberate presence and involvement of the mass media, whose coverage took their stories to a much wider audience. Aaj TV<sup>97</sup> made the Manchar Lake assembly the subject of its prime-time current affairs discussion programme *Seyasat*, inviting experts, local government representatives and community members to join the audience and the panel. Uks, an independent production house producing current affairs programmes, also produced two short radio documentaries, one of which focused on problems faced by women.

The media coverage played a key role in amplifying poor people's views and scaling up wider public debate by reinforcing the strong local impact of the community-based debate, and also providing a platform for provincial and national discussion. The assembly also encouraged neighbouring communities to hold similar events, led well connected local landowners to voice commitment to helping to find solutions for the communities' problems, and prompted the provincial governor to invite community leaders to Karachi for discussions.

Individual journalists were sensitised and motivated by the event. Khalid Jamil of Aaj TV said: 'It was shocking to witness that the livelihood of people has been almost destroyed and more than 40,000 families have migrated from Manchar. I had never participated in a people's assembly – it was really a unique experience. I felt that we media representatives are not doing justice to our job. We must highlight such issues more and hold accountable all those who are responsible for such disasters.'

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To find out more about IRC, see [www.interactivetheatre.org.pk](http://www.interactivetheatre.org.pk)  
For further information about Shirkat Gah, see [www.shirkatgah.org](http://www.shirkatgah.org)

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The biggest freshwater natural lake in Pakistan, Manchar has been damaged by the influx of saline water as a result of numerous drainage projects. The contamination was a key concern in the oral testimonies

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Some 150 of the 1,200 participants were women – a not insignificant number as gender sensitivities mean that women in the interior of Sindh province are not usually encouraged to attend public functions

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Aaj TV has emerged as an important alternative and independent voice on current affairs issues in Pakistan. It led people-centred coverage of the October 2005 earthquake in the country, and the ordinary person's experience of poverty is a regular topic on the channel. Its reputation for projecting the people's voice and for independent coverage has raised its profile and popularity among Pakistani viewers

# About Panos London

## Inclusive



We believe that embracing the views of poor and marginalised people is essential for sustainable and effective development.

Taking part in dialogue and debate contributes to a healthy and vibrant society.

## Empowering



We believe that poor and marginalised people should drive and shape the changes needed to improve their lives.

We enable people to share information and ideas, speak out and be heard.

## Balanced



We believe people need accessible information reflecting a wide range of views.

This allows them to make informed choices about crucial issues that have an impact on their lives.

## Diverse



We respect different views, value local knowledge and encourage a range of approaches in our work worldwide.

We believe that freedom of information and media diversity are essential for development.

## Illuminating



We shed light on ignored, misrepresented or misunderstood development issues.

We believe that the views of poor and marginalised people give greater insight into their lives and offer unique perspectives on the challenges they face.

# [www.panos.org.uk](http://www.panos.org.uk)

Good journalism can shape public opinion and act as a lever for policy change. It can raise awkward questions and champion the views of poor people. At a time when the world is struggling to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, this report argues that many international donors are yet to appreciate that a vibrant, independent media sector is essential for development and needs support.

Based on findings from six countries in Africa and South Asia, *Making poverty the story* analyses the serious political, commercial and professional obstacles to stronger media coverage, highlights where the media have played a part in raising debate, and identifies what civil society and other policy actors could do to support more effective reporting.

**Cover image**

Newspapers such as the *Daily Nation* in Kenya could play a critical role in raising awareness and promoting debate around national and international policies on poverty reduction.

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