

Sustainable Development Through Youth Involvement in Citizen Journalism

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Abstract

According to World Bank Development Indicators, Kenya is among the countries that lead with the highest population of people living below the poverty index. This has been enhanced by the poor economic and development record of the country, particularly the hard economic times that continue to face many nations today as well as the high cost of living. According to Millennium Development Goal number eight, the world has been tasked to eradicate poverty by halving world population living in less than a dollar per day and those who suffer from hunger by the year 2015. The paper is going to be based on a thesis undertaken in one of Nairobi's biggest slums on how a group of youths are using their talents and skills acquired through in-house training and practicing citizen journalism. The youth in Kenya make up 65% of the population. A big number of these youths are unemployed. This paper seeks to investigate how the youth can involve themselves in citizen journalism to create sustainable development. The research was an ethnographic case study which was carried out using qualitative research method. Purposive sampling was used. Participant observation, interviews and document analysis were used to assess the activities of the journalists. Thematic data analysis was used to analyze data. Further studies recommended include focusing on the role of the media in meeting other MDG goals. The county government in Kenya can also support grassroots community media in order to meet other MDGs.

Keywords: MDGs, Citizen Journalism, youth unemployment, poverty eradication, Kibera

Introduction

According to a 2005 UN report, poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is falling; however the level of poverty is still very high with more than half (53%) of the population was living below the poverty line as of 2003, with a projection that by 2020, the total number of slum dwellers might rise to 1.5 billion (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2005). Kenya like most African countries recognizes the September 2000 Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations Assembly as a great opportunity to address human welfare worldwide but particularly in the developing countries. The MDGs were viewed by African states as an initiative by the international

community to aid in the fight against poverty, accelerate human development, and facilitation of the gradual but more effective integration of the developing world especially Africa (Ministry of Planning and National Development, 2005). This is because the MDGs provide a road map for reducing poverty and hunger, saving children and mothers from premature death, providing sustainable and decent livelihoods, and preserving the environment for future generations.

The millennium development Goals are measurable targets attached to a timeframe for making a difference in the lives of billions of people. The UN Economic Commission for Africa 2005 says that the governments in developing and developed countries have jointly committed themselves to provide the resources and the policies to implement these goals which were adopted in the year 2000. The first and primary Goal of the MDG "Eradicate Extreme Hunger and Poverty" is pivotal, without which the remaining seven goals are rendered unachievable. Bringing about education, gender equality, reducing child or maternal mortality, combating lethal diseases or ensuring environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without having the ability to make available means of dignified livelihoods for those living under extreme poverty. Unclean water, poor sanitation, housing and other infrastructure in the slum areas, is one of the challenges of meeting Millennium Development Goals. These challenges can not be ignored because according to the UN HABITAT (2006) report, slum dwellers in developing countries amount to a third of all urban residents.

Poor coordination or communication capacity is to be blamed for the failure of most development projects in Africa (Okigbo and Eribo, 2004). There is no proper communication to energize and mobilize the innate capacity of the people who are the target of most development programmes. Poverty eradication in Kenya has for a long time been about policies being laid down with only the top government echelon being in the picture while the majority of Kenyans who are the most affected by these issues not having a clue of the on-

goings. For the Kenyan government to be able to successfully fight poverty, it must involve the citizens because only they can name and frame their problems effectively. Mass participation in development, has been recognized as the best route to sustainable development. If the Kenyan government wants to create a sustainable change and development then it must start where the people are, especially where the people living in poverty are. According to Berger (2011), it is crucial to promote an engaged citizenry as this often leads to a wise and informed citizenry thus promoting democratic development while holding governments to account.

Media's Potential

The media plays a key role of not only disseminating information but also providing a platform for members of the public to debate on the current issues of the day. Media provides a platform for citizen participation in democratic processes by focusing attention on issues of concern to citizens, reporting those issues from the citizens' perspectives as opposed to that of politicians, experts and other elite actors. Media also offers citizens opportunities to articulate and debate their opinions on issues, elaborating on what citizens can do to address those issues, organizing sites for citizen deliberation and action such as roundtables, community forums and local civic organizations, and following up on citizen initiatives through ongoing and sustained coverage. These media roles are vital to sustainable development because as the Pantos Institute (2007) observed, sustainable development can only be achieved when people are allowed to participate in debates and decisions that affect their lives. People need to be informed but they should also be able to make their voices heard a provision only provided for by the media.

With sub-Saharan Africa being the fulcrum of the Millennium Development campaigns, the mass media are increasingly being courted to help the continent meet the MDGs (Beckett and Kyrke-Smith 2007). The use of mass media for participatory communication especially by marginalized poor people who are the targets of most development programmes was emphasized as crucial during the world congress on communication for development in 2007 (The World Bank, 2007). Most scholars have looked at the potential of mainstream media in promoting sustainable development but very little has been documented about the use of citizen journalism to attain the same. Citizen journalism especially in Kenya has been overlooked and underestimated.

Citizen Journalism And Poverty Eradication

Over the past decade, citizen journalism mostly came to the forefront during crisis reporting where individuals at a scene of crisis capture the moment and pass it to the mainstream media. However with the current technological advances, citizen journalism is now taking information directly to networked audiences via internet and mobile phones. There is a lot of debate around the issue of citizen journalism killing mainstream journalism especially in developed countries. However what is apparent is the fact that citizen journalism has become a common addition to the mainstream media. Outstanding examples include blogging by Salam Pax in Iraq, recording of the London bombings on mobiles, reporting and sharing of information by citizens during the destruction

caused by Hurricane Katrina, in 2012 sharing of details of the two day-long Mumbai siege via Twitter (**Usha M. Rodrigues**) and the recent video of a boy being brutally attacked by the Kenyan police that was circulated to most media houses.

Citizen journalism in Kenya especially has been accelerated by the high speed internet connectivity and the use of mobile phones. Growing demand for information and communication services, combined with technological advances, growing infrastructure and falling prices, are allowing more and more people across the globe to join the information society. Mobile cellular

penetration levels had reached an estimated 76 per cent, and almost one in three people were online by the end of 2010 (MDG report, 2011).

In this era of interactive technology and Kenya being rated among the leading countries worldwide in regards to tweeting, the Kenyan government needs to see citizen journalism as a means for development and social change. This is because citizen journalism just like the mainstream local media provides a voice to local communities, and highlights and solves their day-to-day issues. The KNN for instance, has pointed to the fact that citizen journalism is not just about witnesses reporting news during crisis times, but also about being active participants in social change. Empowering citizens to gather, report and present their local news provides them with a platform to solve their own problems stemming from ignorance, corruption and a lack of the basic amenities and infrastructure necessary for development and growth. (**Usha M. Rodrigues**).

Citizen journalism especially in Kenya has been overlooked and underestimated. Erica Hagen, a media scholar and the founder of Kibera News Network understood the power of citizen journalism. In 2010, he provided the youth of Kibera slum with an opportunity to volunteer and hard work within Kibera. Having realized how rapid urbanization and growth in slum dwellings are putting pressure on social services, Erica was determined to start a community mapping and reporting project. By involving the youth wholly in the project, he aimed at not only changing the people's perception about Kibera, but also bringing a change to the youth themselves; a project which would be a source of livelihood for the youth and a project that would positively change the community. This study focused on the first goal of the MDGs by specifically focusing on how the youth can explore the opportunities provided by citizen journalism as a means to earn income and in turn provide a source of livelihood in slum areas and in turn eradicate poverty within themselves while helping the community achieve the same. The study also focused on how the youth are using Citizen Journalism in attainment of MDGs.

Methods

A qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews, participant observations and content analysis were used to obtain data for the study. A complete sample of six participants drawn from Kibera News Network in Kibera slums was selected through purposive sampling. On the day of recruitment, the selected participants were then briefed of the objectives of the study. Thereafter, the researchers made arrangements with six willing participants about the time and convenient venue where the interviews were to be conducted.

The interviews mostly focused on how the youth are using citizen journalism to eradicate poverty within them and how they have helped the society achieve the same. This involved the use of a set of questions that acted as a guide on issues to pursue, rather than a strict format needing to be followed. The interviewer raised the question and then let the participant guide the direction in which he wanted to respond. This enables participants to illuminate their own experiences with citizen journalism and to provide details that the interviewer may not have anticipated. By means of probing, participants were guided back to the theme of discussion when they wandered off the topic. Interviews with the participants took between 30 - 45 minutes.

Data analysis was carried out using the NVivo programme where codes and themes showing participants responses to the interview questions were generated. Participants were informed in advance of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage, or to decline to respond to whichever questions they felt uncomfortable with.

Findings and Discussion

In order to explore whether the participants really understood the power of citizen journalism, the participants were asked why they joined KNN. They were also asked why they are still working at KNN despite the lack of monetary incentives. They were further asked if they thought their works at KNN brought about any significant difference in their local community (Kibera slum). The responses to these questions were probed to understand how KNN is being used to bring about social change in Kibera slums.

An analysis of the interview transcripts and videos illustrates indeed there is an interconnectivity between citizen journalism and social change among the poor people. The analysis also illustrates the intersubjective nature of meaning

generated by the participants in relation to issues affecting them especially unemployment. There was a common tendency by the participants to respond using collective pronouns such as 'we as the youths' rather than the singular 'I/myself', even when the question was framed well enough to show the interviewer's interest in the interviewee's own views or experiences.

Youth unemployment

The interviews revealed that most of the participants joined KNN due to lack of employment and also due to their passion for journalism despite not having any training in this field. Most of them joined KNN with a hope of a better tomorrow. When the organization was founded by Erica Hagen the total number of volunteers was 21 but most people dropped out when they realised that KNN was non-profit organization set out to improve the livelihoods of the slum dwellers thus it could not provide them with the money they dreamt of. Gilbert who has been volunteering for KNN since its inception shared his initial thought about KNN:

After clearing my high school, I did not have money to join college that is when I learnt about KNN, so I decided to join and see how it works out.

Like the majority of the participants in this study, Gilbert initially thought of KNN as a Non-Governmental organization that employs youths then pays them handsomely at the end of the month. Gilbert's account brings out the reality of most poverty eradication interventions being used by NGOs. Most NGOs go out to the slum areas, pick out unemployed youths, pay them for a couple of days and then pose with them in front of cameras, using these interventions as PR tools to get more funding and this does not entirely help the youths. Gilbert further explains his expectations when he joined KNN:

...I thought that we would go for road shows around the area for a couple of days then be given our pay after these road shows but that wasn't the case. I must confess that I felt a little bit discouraged at first but my vision for a better tomorrow for myself made me hang on.

After understanding KNN's vision for the youth, this participant decided to stay put with a hope of gaining some journalistic skills that will help him secure a job in the mainstream media industry. The main purpose of joining citizen journalism in this account is not for the love of it but for purposes of preparing oneself for the job market. KNN can therefore be credited for helping to prepare the youths who can not afford college fees to train almost freely in journalism thus giving them a chance to secure jobs elsewhere so as to improve their livelihoods.

Other youths in Kibera have joined KNN due their passion for journalism, Mwangi is one of them. Mwangi a 25 year old has been running a video shop for the past five years but when he learnt of KNN last year, he decided to join this group with the aim of gaining some journalistic skills. This has bore fruits for him and he is happy that organizations like KNN are actually helping the youths who can not afford to go to colleges live their dream:

I dropped out of school in form three due to lack of school fees and five years ago I took over my dad's business but that was not my dream. My dream was

to be a journalist because I have always wanted to represent my neighbourhood, I have always wanted to tell the world what it is like to live in Kibera. KNN has given me this opportunity and through what we do as KNN youths, am living my dream. I would just encourage the youths from this neighbourhood never to give up.

Not enough but good enough

The participants said that the stipend they are given at the end of the month is not good enough but through the empowerment that they get from KNN, they have used the little they earn to set-up businesses for themselves whereby they empower other youths economically by employing them in these businesses. The participants said that they are given a stipend of KShs. 4000 a month but only if at the end of the month they produce at least eight videos covering stories on Kibera. Kiriri, a KNN volunteer who now runs his own hair saloon business had this to say;

...KNN has been a blessing to me in some way. Although what I get is not enough, I have been able to start a business using the little I get from here. My friend and I started a hair saloon that has been giving us an income to sustain our lives.

All the participants have other jobs that help them survive because what they get from KNN is not enough. However just like Kiriri most of them either saved up the stipend they got from KNN to start their own businesses or used this stipend to expand the small businesses they were running. Ken, the leader of the KNN team and also a youth from the Kibera slums says KNN is good enough for him and the stipend issue is merely a challenge:

This is just a challenge, in everything we do in life, there are challenges and what counts is how we overcome these challenges. For me KNN has made me who I am today. Without KNN probably I would be a thug, maybe. But above all I am proud because back in the neighbourhood people look up to me, the younger generation wants to be like me. My

story is one of a hopeless boy from a humble background who has risen above all the challenges to make a difference in society. I am proud of myself.

Similarly, Vincent also a team player, views KNN as being good enough for the youths in Kibera. He cites moving away from doing drugs when he joined KNN and KNN has made him look at life positively.

We are here to bring change

Kibera News Network has a unique way of reaching out to the people of Kibera. The citizen journalism group mainly reaches its audience through *YouTube Broadcast Yourself*. Due to the fact that very few individuals can access the internet, the team came up with the idea of community screening. Essentially, they record their news items on a CD, they then walk in to a local video room "local theatre" and for an hour or so, they show the locals their news items and discuss over it. Another way in which they reach out to the audience is through distribution of the recorded news items to the *matatus* which normally have small screens inside. Their target audience is the commuters who get to see the stories produced by KNN. Finally, they distribute the videos to the hospitals in Kibera where locals can watch the news items as they wait to be seen by a doctor.

In their bid to reach out to the locals, they are able to bring change to the community. Their stories raise awareness in terms of disease outbreaks, where to receive services and government and non governmental programmes that

the locals can benefit from. Creating awareness and giving people a voice is a way in which the locals can eradicate poverty for they are able to raise their concerns and debate on issues for the common good. The views the citizen journalists get from the locals is also meant to improve their working.

Conclusion

Kibera News Network is a unique form of media that has been helping the youth in Kibera to improve their livelihoods. It may look like a big joke for a high school drop out to practice journalism but it is this particular form of journalism that has been helping the community beyond imagination. If a community is given a voice, their democratic sphere is advanced. Further studies recommended include focusing on the role of the media in meeting other MDG goals and also intensive studies on the role of other forms of information exchange such as blogging and social media networks in meeting Millennium Development Goals.

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