

Representation in Government and Development Challenges among Igede People of Benue State, Nigeria: The Imperative of Community Radio Broadcasting

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Abstract

This paper examines the contending issues in the representation of Igede people in government, the challenges of development and the imperative of community radio broadcasting. The paper notes the importance of minority representation in government to community development especially among marginalized groups and the need to have a communication channel for expression of the people's development aspirations. The paper is anchored on Agenda Setting Theory. Analysis of the struggle for development in Igede land indicates that even though some challenges are self-inflicted largely due to lack of unity of purpose, the lack of opportunities for election into major government positions at the state and federal levels have resulted to helpless exclusion of Igede people from the sharing of Nigeria's common wealth. Consequently, the area has remained undeveloped; lack of quality education and health facilities, bad roads, unemployment and general poverty among the people. Going forward, there is the need for community radio that will mobilize, educate, and foster unity and common front for Igede people that are struggling with underdevelopment and marginalization. The paper therefore, welcomes the development and operation of Choice FM community radio in the area and tasks the station to support the agitation for political power shift to the area as well as set agenda for the overall development of Igede land through dedicated programming.

Key words: Representation, government, challenges, rural development, Community Radio

Introduction

The democratic access to Nigeria's political economy and structures by all citizenry devoid of injustice is critical to widespread socio-economic and political development particularly among marginalized and voiceless minority groups like Igede people where acute poverty has continued to constrain development. The reigning paradigm of development according to Nweke (2010) is one which places emphasis and priority on the right of the citizens to fairly participate in the structure of state and civil society. This explains the nexus between rural development, communication and opening of the nation's political economy to democratic participation by the citizenry especially the minority and vulnerable groups.

Community radio is a useful communication tool for meeting the information and development needs of people at the grassroots. Thus, Kasoma (2002, p.23) notes that community radio is "a system of radio broadcasting whereby a community establishes, operates and manages a radio station for the ultimate objective of meeting the communication needs of its members." It follows from this description that community radio can serve as an independent platform for interactive discussions and decisions about representation in government and the challenges of development in Igede land.

The current reality in Nigeria is that the democratic and professional hegemony in the media industry hinders adequate and balanced representation and development of marginalized groups like the Igede people leading to exclusion in the sharing of the national cake. One of the alternative and quick response strategies is a communication platform such as Choice FM community radio to fast track social cohesion and development in Igede land. It is in this wise that this paper attempts to critically examine the contending issues in the representation of Igede people in government, challenges of development and the imperative of community radio as organizational mouthpiece of the people.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting Theory

This paper is anchored on agenda setting theory. The agenda setting is a media effect theory propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 which holds that apart from the traditional functions of informing, educating and entertaining, the media can also give prominence to certain development issues or events with the view of bringing them to "public notice". In agenda setting, editors, journalists and broadcasters are expected to place priority and filter what to include and what not to include in their contents (Chapman, 2001). What this means is that the media give priority to certain issues or events to attract public attention to achieve their mobilization motive. Griffin (1994) however, notes that agenda setting theory places emphasis on the power of the media though not undermining the reality that the consumers of media contents were still free to choose or active in the communication effect process. Agenda setting postulates

that the mass media predetermine through their gatekeeping activities what issues are regarded as important in the society at a given time. It does not believe that the media has the power to determine what to think but rather has the power to determine what to think about (Folarin, 1998).

The relevance of agenda setting theory to this paper lies principally on the ascribed power of the media to influence target audience to reflect on issues that can lead to societal development and social changes. Interestingly, this value of agenda setting theory connects conveniently with the thrust of community radio broadcasting. This is particularly important in Nigeria where media principles especially those of radio broadcasting are still largely trapped in the philosophies of state and commercial order. Hence, the voices of the isolated and marginalized Igede people living in rural communities of Benue State to achieve expression and fair participation in the structure of government are mostly denied. Thus, the principal tenet of agenda setting theory supports the need to use community radio to mobilize Igede people to agitate for equitable representation of the area in government for enhanced development.

Discussion

Struggle for Development in Igede Land

Globally, all conscious societies, whether developed or developing are engaged in several struggles for development. Development here majorly refers to the level of socio-economic and political empowerment of people in a particular society. The idea of struggle therefore, suggests that some effort is required to collect the resources that guarantee development for the people from the common wealth of the country either because the resources available for distribution are scarce or that there is possible problem of transparency in the distribution process or both. The struggle for socio-economic and political development by Igede people has come a long way. From the history of the conflict between Igede people and their then neighbours, the Ora people in the present Edo State over a broken earthen pot to the present day realities, Igede people have been engaged in one form of struggle or the other for development. While age-long neglect of the people by successive governments provides one explanation for the failure of such development efforts, other limitations are self-inflicted as the paper will attempt to unveil and examine them.

Indeed, Igede people of Benue State, Nigeria have suffered prolonged neglect in terms of participation in government and community development. Consequently, they have continued to suffer exclusion from the sharing of public resources. This is perhaps, the reason why Harold D. Lasswell cited in Ogbu (2012) says that politics is basically concerned with, “who gets what, when and how”. Contrarily to this postulation, the reality in Nigeria and Benue State where Igede people are located is who gets what, who you have in positions of authority or power and how many more you can get regardless of the interest of less privilege minority groups. This scenario has led to the helpless entanglement of

Igede people in the intricate web of poverty and underdevelopment; children lack qualitative education due to poor state of public schools, no access to good and affordable health facilities resulting to controllable death especially the high maternal and infant mortality, bad roads and general transportation systems, food and nutrition difficulties, large scale unemployment which has continue to threaten the enterprise and future of youths in the area, etc.

Igede Representation in Government and Development Challenges

We have established that representation or participation in government can stimulate socio-economic and political development of the people. This is more so that government has unfortunately, become the premise for social and economic empowerment of privileged individuals and groups in Nigeria. We shall examine three major factors contending against effective representation of Igede people in successive governments in Nigeria.

Faulty Recruitment Standards: First, are the faulty recruitment standards and processes. It is observed that the criteria for sourcing people for appointment in government and elective positions have remained a huge contradiction to logic. Recent political activities show that in Igede land and most other parts of Nigeria, some of the cruel requirements for recruitment into government are that such candidates should have natural capacity for lie telling, praise singing, back stabbing, killing, thuggery, etc. In the same vein, Igede Nation has painfully and shamefully disregarded competence and pedigree for money and material inducements in the selection of people to represent the area at different levels of government.

Indeed, it has come to a point that anybody in Igede land regardless of training, preparation and general competence can boldly ask for any position in government at local, state and federal levels so long as he or she has money to give to the king makers and ride on the vulnerability of poverty captives in the area. Sadly, educational qualification and career development are no longer seen as asset for progression and representation of Igede people in government. Rather, one's training; background and preparation are treated as huge liabilities against him or her. The result is that very competent people from Igede land continue to idle at home while the incompetent ones represent the people in government. This kind of situation cannot produce sustainable development because no person can conveniently exceed his or her background in public affairs. In other words, one's background and training are critical to public performance that can stimulate sustainable community development.

Another dangerous effect of the foregoing is the creation of wrong values among the people especially the young ones. Unfortunately, majority of youths in the area have refused to farm and engage in other productive ventures because of their wrong perception of politics as a profession. In fact, many of them see themselves as "career politicians" who can only earn a living through the enterprise. This is indeed, a big development problem especially that political

structures in Nigeria lack clear-cut ideology on which the future of our youths can be productively predicated.

Lack of Unity and Political Leader: The continued lack of acceptable political leader in Igede land is also, a contending issue against valuable representation of the people in government, their national visibility and influence. The age-long search for a political leader of Igede Nation is still unable to produce a commonly accepted one. Aduma and Idoko (2010) paraded photographs of about 34 prominent sons and daughters of Igede Nation in a desperate but elusive search for a political leader from them. It is important to note that a search for a million years will not produce any political leader for our people because, it is not an issue of party patronage, zoning arrangement and other known forms of sharing in our political system. It is rather, a product of nature through one's personal integrity, hard work, honesty, goodness, selflessness, as well as commitment to truth and justice.

Regrettably, the open character and unity of purpose in dealing with issues of development in Igede land on the part of our early leaders which eventually lost its unity of direction to clannish and factional interests, the emergence of self centred politics and outright disrespect for elders by young people of this generation all have their roots in our current crisis of political leadership. Drawing from Mvendaga (2014) concern on basic political ignorance of several Tiv elites, majority of Igede elites also do not know why they are in politics. Many of them see politics as avenue to settle scores with fellow Igede elites who had wronged them in the past, or whom they should “overtake” in the rat race of life. Hardly are group goals the main motivation for political participation and behavior.

Igede people are already experiencing serious problems due to lack of political leadership. After the luck that the people had which produced, late Chief Ogiri Ajene as the Deputy Governor of Benue State under the administration of George Akume, subsequent sharing of principal political positions both at the state and federal levels have completely excluded Igede people largely due to uncoordinated positions and interests. This is also because Igede people do not have a political leader of clear authority and influence whose participation in politics is motivated by the collective aspirations of Igede people. Indeed, a political leader who can coordinate the various positions and interests of Igede people on all matters of development and provide useful direction is still lacking. This situation truly calls for self-examination and possible repentance on the part of all actors and emerging actors in the affairs of Igede Nation.

Lack of Opportunities for Igede Representation in Government: By the prescription of our constitution, Igede people are entitled to five (5) major elective positions namely, Governor, Senator, House of Representatives, State House of Assembly and Local Government Council Chairman. This is in

addition to the office of the President of Nigeria which for now remains a far dream for the people except by divine restructuring of our political landscape or some kind of accident because of the minority status of the people. Of the five positions, Igede people have somehow, been excluded from becoming the state Governor and going to senate due to the un-brotherly political behaviour of the “powerful” political giants at the state and zonal levels who have shunned values of unity and togetherness in the quest to satisfy their appetite for political power. The situation in Benue State needs rethinking as history has overturned the majority factor as bases for marginalization in Nigeria since Dr. Goodluck Jonathan emerged as Governor of Bayelsa State and subsequently, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria despite his minority status.

While the foregoing factor of exclusion at both federal, state and zonal levels provide one explanation for lack of opportunities for Igede representation in government, other limitations appear to be self-inflicted. Igede people also seem to be frightened or lack adequate courage to actualize their well-deserved right to occupy both the positions of President, Governor and senate. It can be recalled that when Dr. Isaac Egboja contested against Senator David Mark at the party primaries in 2003, he enjoyed overwhelming support from almost all the local government areas in Zone C but lacked the needed courage to push through the collective will of Igede people. This is in addition to the fact that Igede people have not made any visible and strong effort to contest for the positions of Governor of Benue State and President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Consequently, there is the need to change this narrative especially in the unfolding 2023 politics.

The remaining positions which are grossly inadequate giving the huge population of the people have fuelled enormous tension, enmity among the people and have rather worsened unity of purpose and collective quest for development such that ethical values are disregarded by both the young and old so as to enjoy government patronage. The inadequate space for participation in government has indeed, created a dangerous group of desperate politicians who trade in lie telling and praise singing; they explore all means to remain close to those in government for selfish interests even at the expense of friendship and brotherly love which are cherished values of Igede people. The worry here is that this class of desperate politicians is growing in population, influence and evil devices.

It should be noted that Igede people are not the only group affected by issues associated with group marginalization in Nigeria. Other ethnicities especially minority groups face similar challenges. The major concern is that successive governments in Nigeria have not shown appreciable will to address the problem. In a democracy, government's lack of transparency and neglect of any unit of its population by way of exclusion from government and sharing of public wealth can produce adverse effects. Clinton (2009) observes that:

The most immediate source of disconnection between Nigeria's wealth and its poverty is the failure of government at the federal, state and local

levels. Lack of transparency, accountability and justice have eroded the legitimacy of the government and contributed to the rise of groups that embrace violence and reject the authority of the state.

Little wonder that violent conflicts continue to erupt and escalate in many parts of the country without significant solution. One of the valuable dividends of democracy is the guarantee of the rights of all right thinking people and component units to fair, just and equitable allocation from the country's common wealth.

The Imperative of Community Radio

Community radio constitutes the third tier of a three-tier structure of radio broadcasting. Alumuku (2006) cited in Ogbu and Onekutu (2018) holds that the concept of community radio is best understood against the background of other forms of broadcasting namely: public service broadcasting and commercial or private broadcasting. While public service refers to media services provided by a statutory body usually state-funded but publicly owned, commercial broadcasting on the other hand provides programmes designed primarily for profit from advertising revenue and is owned and controlled by private individuals or by commercial enterprise. The third tier of broadcast ownership and operation is community radio which pursue a social development agenda and which is non-profit.

All over the world, advocates of sustainable human development believe that community radio holds the greatest potential for measurable and participatory development especially among voiceless minority groups like Igede people (Nweke, 2008). However, records show that Nigeria remains the last country in the West African Sub-Region to operate community radio sector. After sustained advocacy for the establishment of community radio in Nigeria especially by the Nigeria Community Radio Coalition, the Federal Government through the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) approved 17 provisional community broadcast licences to community development organizations across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria in May, 2015 (Olufemi, 2015). Based on the NBC approval, some of the licensed stations have since commenced operations. Accordingly, Agba Community Radio Initiative in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria which is one of the approved community radio stations commenced broadcasting with its Choice FM, 93.3 on 23rd December, 2016 and has remained on air (Ogbu and Onekutu, 2018).

Records have also shown that the history of community radio is tied to the quest for socio-economic, political and cultural freedom. According to Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada, (2001), the stimulus that brought the concept of community radio to reality in Latin America where it started in 1947 was the fight against poverty and social injustice which were prevalent among the people. Indeed, one of the major problems constraining credible representation

of Igede people in government and attendant socio-economic, political and cultural development is the prolonged lack of access to modern and appropriate communication systems for mass mobilization. Genuine development among marginalized minorities like Igede people can only be possible through participatory communication which the operation of community radio freely offers. It is in this regard that the development and operation of Choice FM, 93.3 in Igede land remains a timely intervention. In this wise, Igede people should develop more interest in their community radio and support the station through funding, participation and other sustainability requirements towards exploring its enormous benefits in response to the numerous development challenges in the area. The paper has in the next section, drawn attention to more specific areas that community radio can be used to support the representation of Igede people in government towards the overall development of the area.

Use of Choice FM for Development in Igede Land

Based on the NBC approval, Choice FM, 93.3, a community radio located in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria commenced broadcasting on 23rd December, 2016 (Ogbu and Onekutu 2018) and has remained on air. Giving the prospects of community radio in rural development, it is important to build a nexus between the established issues affecting the representation of Igede people in government, development in the area and the operations of Choice FM community radio in Igede land. Indeed, the main goal of community radio operating among marginalized groups like Igede people is to serve as organizational mouthpiece in advocating for political participation and overall development of the rural community through appropriate radio programmes. In building the nexus, the following tasks are specifically instructive for Choice FM:

- (a) Promote unity especially among the Igede elite class.
- (b) Support agitations for fair and equitable representation of Igede people in government towards socio-economic and political development within the framework of the law. This support should be extended to all individuals and groups such as Igede in 2023 Movement that are advocating for power shift in favour Igede people in the unfolding political order.
- (c) Mobilize youths in Igede land to channel their energies towards positive development goals
- (d) Discourage money politics and other forms of inducements in Igede land and re-enact the age-long virtue of fairness, justice, truth telling, etc. which Igede people are known for in recruitment processes to political offices at all levels.
- (e) Sensitize Igede politicians to pursue politics not as an end in itself but as a means of achieving the overall development goals of Igede Nation.
- (f) Mobilize community members to shun clannish and other sectional sentiments in the collective struggle for development of Igede land.

- (g) Provide organizational platform for community members to hold their representatives in government at all levels to account.
- (h) Promote the participation of Igede women in politics and discourage all forms of socio – cultural limitations. In this wise, research evidence shows that this is achievable with community radio advocacy. In a study conducted by Ogbu (2016) on Uses, Frameworks, and Influences of Community Radio Broadcasting in Ghana using questionnaire and oral interview instruments of survey, one of the respondents and Station Manager of *Radio Simli*, Saibuna Fisah states that the station has contributed immensely to the political development of the people in the Northern Region of Ghana especially the promotion of women participation in politics. According to her:
 - ...prior to the political enlightenment programmes of *Radio Simli*, it was believed that politics is only for males. The outcome of our mobilization is that there are now three elected females to the District Assembly.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

This paper has as much as possible identified key problems affecting the representation of Igede people in government and their implications on socio-economic and political development of the area. From the analysis of the struggle for development in Igede land it is established that even though some challenges are self-inflicted largely due to lack of unity of purpose, the lack of opportunities for election into major government positions at the state and federal levels have resulted to helpless exclusion of Igede people from the sharing of Nigeria's common wealth. Consequently, the area has remained undeveloped; lack of quality education and health facilities, bad roads, unemployment and general poverty among the people. Even though, the paper addressed the issue of representation in government, the identified development challenges require multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional responses involving government, corporate bodies, Igede elites, individuals, youths and the media especially Choice FM community radio.

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